

CRIME

Lansdale man convicted of first-degree murder in stabbing death of co-worker

Margaret Gibbons, staff writer

Published 12:01 a.m. ET June 11, 2016 | Updated 5:00 p.m. ET June 11, 2016

“Life for life,” wrote Lansdale resident Peter Atem in a suicide note shortly after he stabbed a co-worker to death in February 2015 at a Franconia meat packaging plant.

Those words proved prophetic Friday albeit not the way that Atem, 33, of the 300 block of Cannon Avenue, had intended.

While Atem, a Sudanese refugee who came to the United States in 2000, survived his suicide attempt, he will spend the rest of his life behind bars for the killing of Danny Vazquez, 25, of Philadelphia.

After deliberating about four hours at the conclusion of a trial that began Tuesday, a Montgomery County jury of nine men and three woman found Atem guilty of first-degree murder and possession of an instrument of crime for Vazquez’s killing.

Atem showed no emotion on learning his fate.

With the death penalty off the table, state law requires that Atem be sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.

Another 2½- to five-year sentence could be tacked on for his conviction on a charge of possessing an instrument of crime.

As she left the courtroom at the conclusion of the trial, Johely Vazquez, Vazquez’s fiancée and mother of their three children, gave Assistant District Alec O’Neill a tearful hug, thanking him.

“We are very satisfied with the outcome and want to thank the district attorneys, the detectives and investigators and everyone who put in the effort to get this conviction,” said

family spokesman Jason Vazquez, Vazquez's older brother. "Justice has been served for Danny and all of us."

Johely Vazquez described her fiancé as a "homebody," who worked long hours at a less than desirable job to provide for his family that included children, ages 3, 7 and 10.

His death has been hard on his family, particularly the children, said Johely Vazquez.

"They wake up in the morning, missing his morning kiss," she added.

"This case has always been a tragedy but, in the end, justice was served," said O'Neill who prosecuted the case with Assistant District Attorney Heather Hines. "It was clearly not an easy decision for the jury to make."

But the facts supported the verdict, according to O'Neill.

O'Neill and Hines had maintained since the outset that Vazquez's killing was an intentional and premeditated murder.

While Atem had a troubled childhood growing up in Sudan, seeing family members and other children killed there and later in an Ethiopian refugee camp before eventually coming to the U.S. and being placed in a Lansdale foster home, O'Neill said that Atem's childhood experiences played no role in his decision to kill Vazquez that morning at the MOPAC Rendering Plant on Souder Road.

Investigators said in the criminal complaint that the day before the slaying Atem was the victim of a workplace prank in which Vazquez allegedly pulled a chair out from under him. No trial witness testified witnessing the alleged incident although one co-worker said he had heard second hand about the incident while Atem also referred to it in a statement he gave police.

Originally not intending to go to the plant that fatal day on the morning of Feb. 18, 2015, Atem changed his mind.

However, he never clocked in and, instead, went to his locker where he retrieved a butterfly knife with a 4- to 4½-inch blade and then went in search of Vazquez, according to testimony.

Finding Vazquez sitting on a chair while on a break, Atem jumped on top of Vazquez and began brawling with him, according to testimony.

A co-worker intervened and the pair was separated, according to trial testimony. Just minutes later, after the co-worker had returned to his work station, the co-worker heard Vazquez screaming.

The co-worker found Vazquez on the floor, covered with blood, and Atem standing nearby with a knife in his hand, according to testimony.

An autopsy report revealed that Vazquez had suffered nine stab wounds, with most of those wounds to the chest and neck and most at least 4 inches deep, according to trial testimony.

Police found an unresponsive Atem, suffering from a self-inflicted knife slash to the throat. He was slumped in the corner of a bench in a nearby shed, with the knife used in Vazquez's killing and the suicide note next to him.

Defense team Ben Cooper and Megan Schanbacher, who never disputed the fact that their client was responsible for Vazquez's death, had been seeking a conviction on lesser charges of third-degree murder or voluntary manslaughter.

Cooper said he was "disappointed" with the verdict.

He said his client did not deserve having to spend the rest of his days in prison.

Cooper said Atem suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and that prevented him from forming a specific intent to kill. Cooper said he would file an appeal seeking to have the verdict overturned.

Judge Gail A. Weilheimer, who presided in the case, ordered Atem returned to the county prison where he has been held without bail since his arrest.

She did not set a date for Atem's formal sentencing.

Under the law, she must sentence Atem to life without parole on the murder charge but she also has to decide on a sentence for the possession of an instrument of crime conviction.

Jury deliberations got off to a rocky start Friday morning when Weilheimer, with the agreement of both the prosecution and defense, dismissed one of the jurors for unspecified reasons.

The first alternate was recalled but was on his way to a business meeting in New Jersey. The alternate, greeted by applause from his fellow jurors, got back to the courthouse in Norristown by 11:15 a.m.

However, the jury had to begin their deliberations anew because he had not been part of their earlier deliberations.

Margaret Gibbons: 610-279-6153; email: mgibbons@calkins.com; Twitter: @peggibbons