Man convicted of strangling, setting fire to Hershey grandmother gets 30 years in prison

Published: Jan. 10, 2022, 2:07 p.m.
By Charles Thompson | cthompson@pennlive.com

A Dauphin County man was sentenced to a minimum of 30 years in prison Monday for the 2019 murder of a Hershey woman who was the mother of his girlfriend.

Calvin Purdie Jr., who has continued to claim innocence in the strangling death of 49-year-old Charlotte Chaplin, gave no visible response to Judge William Tully's order, and his attorneys said that they will be appealing the conviction. But Tully, who presided over Purdie's November trial and an earlier trial in which jurors weren't able to reach a unanimous verdict, said he was handing down maximum sentences and ordering them to run consecutively because the evidence amassed in the case let him no doubt about the validity of the second jury's third-degree murder verdict. "This was cold, heartless and vicious," Tully told Purdie, adding that he considered the case "about as close to a first-degree murder case that you can come" without a first-degree murder verdict.

The judge also said he was haunted by the juxtaposition of surveillance tapes showing Chaplin going about her everyday activities on what would be the last day of her life, and case photos of her corpse in her West Chocolate Avenue home. "This was a lady who did not deserve the way that she ended," Tully said.

Chaplin was a longtime employee of the Reese's plant in Derry Township, and an active member of her church, the Healing Center Church of God in Christ. She was the mother of four, and had 13 grandchildren. Purdie, 35, said nothing during Monday's one-hour proceeding, other than briefly responding "Yes sir," when the judge asked if he understood his rights to appeal.

But Chaplin's family had a lot to say. Kevin Martin Sr., Chaplin's ex-husband; Kenneth Martin, one of their sons; and D'Vesha Geter, one of Chaplin's nieces, all appealed for Purdie to receive as long a sentence as possible for taking away a woman who they described as a magnet for their family and someone who consistently brought joy to their lives. Kevin Martin said he and Chaplin moved to Harrisburg more than 20 years ago from Jersey City, N.J. in part because they thought they could build a better and safer life for their kids here. But many other relatives followed them here over the last generation primarily because of the force of Chaplin's personality, Geter said.

And they said what galled them most about this case is that someone who knew Chaplin personally and had felt her personality could violently and intentionally kill her. The family members told Tully they are all working on and believe they will eventually be able to forgive the crime, the family members said, because they know that Charlotte would do that. But as part of that process, the Martins said, they need justice.

"This is going to impact our family forever," Kevin Martin Sr. explained, as he asked Tully to make Purdie's sentences for the murder and related arson charges run consecutively. "I'm willing to let the courts and the process handle it, but I am asking you to give my family justice." Purdie made no eye contact with the roughly 15 survivors in attendance Monday. His only apparent connection to anyone in the courtroom, other than his lawyers, was with a single friend who showed up for the proceeding. Purdie tapped his heart and nodded to the man as he was led out of court.

Purdie was found guilty in November of strangling Chaplin on May 23, 2019, and then setting a fire in Chaplin's Derry Township home to try to conceal the evidence. The conviction came after an earlier trial ended with a jury unable to reach a verdict. All sides agree Purdie was at Chaplin's home the night she was murdered. Purdie's girlfriend at the time was Chaplin's daughter Shania. The couple and their 4-year-old daughter were staying overnight in Chaplin's house when she was killed.

District Attorney Fran Chardo and co-counsel Kelly Callihan argued at trial that Purdie had come to see Chaplin as a "barrier" to his relationship with her daughter. The 49-year-old Chaplin didn't like Purdie and didn't want him in her house, Chardo said.

Chardo and Callihan pinned their case on two pieces of evidence: The existence of fresh scratches on Purdie's face the morning of the fire; and the discovery of Purdie's DNA in skin cells scraped from beneath the fingernails of Chaplin's left hand during her autopsy. Taken together, the prosecutors said, those facts showed that Purdie had killed Chaplin during a struggle.

In Monday's proceeding, Chardo asked Tully to order Purdie's arson sentence to run consecutively with the murder sentence, arguing that cover-up attempt was a distinct act that had the separate consequences of endangering Chaplin's daughter, the couple's 4-year girl and many other people. In addition, Chardo noted, Purdie was on parole for a separate aggravated assault conviction at the times of the crime.

"He is a danger to society," Chardo said of Purdie, "and he will remain a danger to society."

First-Assistant Public Defender Paul Muller and co-counsel Elizabeth Ruby contended at trial that Purdie had nothing to do with the killing and only knew something was wrong when the smoke detector in Chaplin's house sounded that morning. Purdie told police his first reaction was to get Shania and their child out of the house. Purdie also said he did try to go back into the house to make sure she wasn't trapped inside, but dense smoke forced him back.

Muller and Ruby argued that a stalker or perhaps one of several of Chaplin's former lovers committed the murder, though prosecutors said the other persons the defense raised as suspects all had solid alibis that checked out. Because he is not accepting responsibility for Chaplin's death, Ruby said, Purdie had no statements for the court Monday. But he did want Chaplin's assembled family members to know that he agreed with their assessments of Charlotte, and that he holds no malice toward them. Though Purdie's combined sentence is 30 years, the sentence is being backdated to his July 2019 arrest. That means the earliest he could be eligible for parole is 2049.

Family members said they were of two minds about Monday's result. Chaplin's son Kenneth Martin said that after two trials and Monday's sentencing, there is definitely a sense of relief that Purdie is being held fully accountable for Chaplin's death, and "we're satisfied that he got the maximums for these charges." That will, he said, help the family start to work on closure. But it doesn't begin to fill the hole left by his Mom's absence, Martin said. "Truly the hardest part of this time in our lives, for me, is that I have four children, and my Mom was their favorite person. To see the pain that they go through each day as they're missing her... It's just devastating."