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Jury Considers Case of Grandson on Trial

By Scott E. Williams
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TEXAS CITY — Jurors will return to the 122nd State District Court in Galveston today to continue deliberations in the capital murder trial of a teen who admitted to police he beat his grandparents to death.

The jury deliberated for about three hours Wednesday in the case of Thomas Justin “T.J.” Thomas.

In closing arguments Wednesday afternoon, defense attorney Tad Nelson painted Thomas, 19, as a slow-witted young man with an I.Q. of 90 who was coerced into participating in the deaths of William and Pearl Clement. Nelson also said coercion led to Thomas making a statement to police hours after the attack.

Prosecutors told jurors Thomas was a merciless murderer who valued the lives of his grandparents less than the small amount of money he and three others gained from their deaths.

Illustrating her point, prosecutor Stacey Jones emptied a small box containing a few dollars in change onto a table.

“This is what their lives were worth to him,” she said.

The box was one of the items police found in a van containing Thomas and three other teens. They also found a bloody tire iron and blood on Thomas’ clothes that later proved to be that of the Clements.

Nelson said there was no disputing that his client was involved in the crime, but accused prosecutors and police of “taking shortcuts” in building the case against him.

Nelson took particular aim at the audiotaped statement in which Thomas said, among other things, “They were screaming, and I started

hitting them.”

Thomas was the only one of the four suspects whose statement was not videotaped.

County Criminal District Attorney Kurt Sistrunk, in his rebuttal argument, said Nelson’s points were attempts to muddle the fact that Thomas obviously murdered his grandparents.

“This is the face of a cold-blooded killer,” he said, pointing at Thomas, who was seated at the defense table.

Because prosecutors are not seeking the death penalty, a guilty verdict in this case would mean an automatic life sentence for Thomas, although he would become eligible for parole after 40 years. Nelson told jurors the automatic life sentence left jurors with no good choice and “paints you into a corner.”

Sistrunk later countered that the jury was only to consider Thomas’ guilt or innocence.

“He’s trying to make you hang your hat on something you’re not even supposed to be considering,” he said.

Daniel Robert Northrup, 19; Eric Lee Kilman, 21; and Christine Marie Cox, 21, also face capital murder charges in the case.