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Jury Selection Begins in Capital Murder Trial

By Scott E. Williams
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TEXAS CITY — Potential jurors filled out questionnaires Monday in a case that has had family members, friends and investigators asking questions for nearly two years.

Thomas Justin “T.J.” Thomas, 19, faces a charge of capital murder in the beating deaths of his grandparents, William and Leona Pearl Clement.

The elderly couple’s daughter found them dead in their Texas City home in February 2004.

They had been beaten to death with a tire iron that police said they found in a van occupied by Thomas and three other teens.

Daniel Robert Northrup, 17; Eric Lee Kilman, 19; and Christine Marie Cox, 19; also face capital murder charges. Thomas is the first of the defendants to go to trial.

Thomas, represented by attorney Tad A. Nelson, has pleaded not guilty, but pretrial hearings about psychiatric examinations indicated the possibility that Thomas could plead insanity.

However, no questions about insanity appeared on the questionnaires that the pool of more than 100 potential jurors filled out Monday afternoon.

The forms were comprised of lists of questions submitted by Nelson, County Criminal District Attorney Kurt Sistrunk and prosecutor Stacey Jones. They asked potential jurors if they had ever been accused of a crime or had been the victim of a crime. They also asked prospective panelists whom they most and least admired. Prospective jurors also were asked if they knew any of the defendants or key witnesses in the case.

Jury selection continues today. Since prosecutors are not seeking the death penalty, a guilty verdict would mean an automatic sentence of life in prison for Thomas.