

The Virgin Islands Consortium

North Carolina Man Sentenced To 40 Years For 2014 killing Of Roommate In St. Thomas

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ST. THOMAS -- A North Carolina man who confessed to killing his roommate more than four years ago has been handed a 40-year prison sentence with credit for time already served, Department of Justice Public Media Officer Corliss Smithen announced Friday.

Jason Brian Coulter, 35, stood before V.I. Superior Court Judge Kathleen Mackay on Friday morning to be sentenced for the murder of William Bennett in late November 2014.

Acting Attorney General Carol Jacobs said justice has been served for the victim and his family.

"This crime was senseless and heinous. It is apparent Jason Coulter, who committed this atrocity, had absolutely no regard for human life," Acting AG Jacobs said. "I hope that while he sits in jail serving his sentence, he will use the time to reflect on what he has done and the heartache he has caused Mr. Bennett's family."

Charged with one count each of first-degree murder, second-degree murder, first-degree assault, third-degree assault and attempt to destroy evidence, as well as two counts of using a dangerous weapon during the commission of a murder, two counts of using a dangerous weapon during the commission of a first-degree assault and two counts of using a dangerous weapon during the commission of a third-degree assault in connection with Bennett's slaying, Coulter accepted a deal from prosecutors and pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in exchange for a 22-year prison term.

During allocution, Assistant Attorney General Eugene Connor, Jr., characterized Coulter as a "sociopath who has no empathy for his fellow human beings."

"He's spent his whole adult life drifting from place to place and bringing evil wherever he went – Hawaii, Florida and now the Virgin Islands... The evil stops here today in the Virgin Islands," AAG Connor said, while asking the judge to impose a sentence of not less than 22 years as stipulated to in the plea agreement.

At sentencing, the court also heard from the victim's daughter, Lauren Bennett Gibson. In recounting the events leading up to her father's death, Gibson said 22 years was not enough for Coulter's crime.

"I'd never had such a traumatic experience before. I don't understand how my dad was such a wonderful human being and how anyone could have done what they did to him... He has no remorse about it... I don't think 22 years is not enough. My dad was 67 years old and I want him to spend 67 years in prison thinking about my dad," Gibson told the court.

Prosecutors had alleged that Coulter clubbed and repeatedly stabbed Bennett to death inside the Sapphire Village apartment they both shared. The incident occurred sometime between Nov. 28 and 29, 2014. Coulter then left the island shortly after and was extradited to the territory almost a year later to face the charges.

According to an affidavit filed by Det. Dwight Griffith in support of Coulter's arrest, one of Bennett's co-workers requested a welfare check on him, which was prompted after she received two "out sick" calls on Nov. 30 and Dec. 1 from Bennett's roommate, Coulter. Bennett was not heard from since.

A group from the hospital's security arrived at Bennett's residence on Dec. 2 and knocked on the door, but there was no answer, according to Griffith's affidavit. They then contacted the property manager, who let them into the apartment. Once inside, they noticed the scent of Clorox bleach, according to Griffith's affidavit. While walking around and inspecting the apartment, they saw sitting in a corner a sheet wrapped around a large object with trash bags heaped on top of it. One officer who touched the bag saw what appeared to be blood, according to Griffith.

Police were called to the scene after Bennett's body was discovered stuffed inside the garbage bag. At the scene, forensic detectives sprayed the apartment with luminal, which

showed the presence of blood on the back wall behind the living room couch, on the living room couch and on a conch shell, according to Griffith's affidavit. Investigators also spoke to several persons who knew both Bennett and Coulter. Based on witnesses' statements and other evidence collected at the scene, there was probable cause to arrest Coulter, who had left the island on Dec. 2, according to Griffith's affidavit.

Having secured an arrest warrant, the Orange County Sheriff's Office in Florida arrested Coulter on July 5, 2015, in connection with the crime. Then, on Nov. 12, 2015, agents from the V.I. Police Department traveled to Orlando, Florida, to return Coulter to the territory. Coulter refused to waive extradition and voluntarily returned to the Virgin Islands, where he was formally arrested and charged, according to court documents.

Since his arrest, Coulter remained in jail unable to post his \$750,000 bail. He was immediately remanded into custody following his sentencing.