

Petty gets maximum sentence for killing ex-wife; family grateful for punishment

Written by Marty Randall

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Ironically, Robert F. "Bobby" Petty will be 56 years old if released after serving just half of the sentence handed down against him on Wednesday afternoon, April 17, for his part in the 2010 death of his ex-wife, Nina Mae Keown.

Petty received the maximum sentence allowed by Indiana law for his conviction for voluntary manslaughter, removal of a body from the scene and obstruction of justice.

That maximum is 56 years.

In Indiana, criminals are allowed one day's credit for each day served, so the least possible time Petty will serve behind bars will be 23 years. He will also receive credit for 226 days served and is required to pay court costs.

County Prosecutor Jason Mount led the team that worked to convict Petty of murder in the August, 2010, death of Nina, a petite blonde. Petty admitted choking her at his mobile home after the woman refused to tell him who she was contacting on her cell phone. He also said during his trial in January that he tried to revive her. When those efforts failed, he undressed her and transported the body to a wooded area near Bethlehem in northern Clark County and dropped it down a small embankment.

He then went back to his trailer near Lexington and took Nina's clothing, blankets and sheets to a relative's farm, where he burned everything.

For three weeks, Petty denied having seen Nina, telling her mother and law enforcement

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officials that the couple argued after leaving an open air music concert late at night and that Nina got off the ATV on which they were riding and walked into a cornfield, saying she was going back to the concert.

During his sentencing hearing on Wednesday, it was revealed that, a day or so after Nina's disappearance, Petty had even called Nina's mother, Debbie Conover, and asked her if she had seen or heard from her daughter.

"I asked him, 'Isn't she with you?' and he said no," Conover recalled during her hearing testimony. She said he also made disparaging remarks about Nina, such as, "She's probably run off again," and "She probably met some man and took off with him."

Petty finally told officials, including the county sheriff at the time, John Lizenby, what had happened that hot August night at his trailer and where Nina's remains could be found. Since his arrest in August, 2010, on an unrelated Clark County warrant, Petty has never been free, and now he faces long years in prison as his punishment for killing Nina.

Though Petty's public defender, Brian Chastain of Corydon, argued that his client's assistance in locating the body and telling his story could be considered mitigating circumstances, Judge Frank Newkirk Jr. found no weight to Petty's so-called cooperation. He ordered that Petty serve the maximum sentence allowed on all of his charges and allowed his Habitual Felon status to add 30 years to the 20 year sentence on the Class B felony.

Prosecutor Mount built an impressive case against allowing Petty any leniency in sentencing. Those present for the four-and-a-half hour hearing listened as several women spoke. First on the stand was Pam Murray Campbell.

Campbell knew both Debbie Conover and Nina Keown. She was working at a convenience store in Clark County one day in 1999 when she said Petty came in armed with a loaded shotgun. He held the gun to her head and demanded money.

Petty was arrested for that crime and sentenced to eight years, of which he served four.

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His criminal history also includes convictions on two more robberies in the early 2000s, one in Clark County and the other in Scott County. Those were reduced to a charge of theft. His violations of several probations and his conviction on a charge of domestic battery were also noted. The victim in that domestic battery was Nina Mae Keown.

"Based on your history, you aren't a good risk," Judge Newkirk told the defendant.

Both Linda Spicer and Debbie Conover testified about the effect of Nina's death on Nina's children, a nine-year-old boy now living with his dad at Spicer's home and a five-year-old girl who lives with Conover and her husband. Spicer is in her 60s and Conover in her 50s. Both agreed with Prosecutor Mount that they never thought they'd be raising young children at their ages.

Perhaps the most poignant statement made in the courtroom that day was one by Conover. "(Nina's death) broke my heart. When we last talked, we had words. We argued because I didn't want her going back to Bobby," she explained. Her daughter had decided to try to reconcile with Petty upon learning that her mother and stepfather planned to move to California.

Following the pronouncement of Petty's sentence, Conover said she appreciated everyone's support in her family's ordeal. "I am glad it's now over and I am glad he is going to serve the maximum amount of time," she told Louisville news reporters.

In the courtroom, family members and friends hugged and cried after the judge left the bench. None looked at Petty, nor did the convicted man look at them. He shuffled slowly out of the courtroom surrounded by three jail officers. His father told his son as Petty stood up to leave, "I'll see you later, son." The elder Petty had few words for reporters covering the sentencing, saying only that there was "...still some good in that boy."

Word of Petty's sentence was quickly posted on the Internet by a Louisville reporter.

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Reflecting back on the nearly three-week trial and the two-and-a-half-year wait for justice, Prosecutor Mount stated, "We are relieved to finally bring this matter to a close. Although we wish we could have seen Petty convicted of the (original charge) of murder in this case, we are obviously pleased that he was sentenced to the maximum time available. It is clear that his history of violent crime, including two armed robberies, his failure to comply with previous terms of probation and his prior domestic battery against the same victim were keys to the Judge's decision."

He added, "I greatly appreciate the patience and trust of Nina's family through this process and am thankful that we could provide some degree of justice to Nina."