

JURY SAYS MAN HIRED WIFE'S KILLER IN 1982 CASE - DETROIT SOCIALITE CONVICTED ALLEGED GUNMAN IS ACQUITTED

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In the nearly 20 years since his wife was murdered **in** a Southfield parking lot, Thomas Randolph rebuilt himself. He turned from a popular community college teacher into a lawyer; from a debt-ridden social worker into a Palmer Woods socialite.

And on Tuesday, he turned again -- from socialite into convicted murderer.

In bizarre back-to-back verdicts Tuesday, an Oakland County Circuit Court **jury** convicted Randolph for the murder-for-hire slaying of his wife nearly 20 years ago, while a second **jury** acquitted the **man** allegedly paid to shoot her.

Accused gunman Sanirell Shannon, 51, shook with sobs of relief as the first **jury** declared his innocence **in** the January **1982** killing of Sharron Randolph outside a restaurant.

Moments later, Thomas Randolph sat emotionless and his family gasped **in** horror as a second **jury** found him guilty of first-degree murder for his **wife's** death.

Randolph, who rose from instructor and counselor at Wayne County Community College to the upper ranks of Detroit's social swirl, saw the last of the life he built after his **wife's** death vanish Tuesday.

The brick home **in** exclusive Palmer Woods. The law practice. The lavish parties thrown with his fourth wife, Marie Jackson-Randolph, already sent to federal prison last year on unrelated fraud charges.

Randolph faces a mandatory sentence on Dec. 14 of life **in** prison without parole.

"He's a strong **man** , he's an overcomer," said Randolph's son, Thomas Randolph III, who vowed to appeal. He said Shannon's not-guilty verdict "sheds light on my father's innocence."

The **men** were charged **in** early 2000, after Shannon's niece and nephew told police that Randolph, now 59, **hired** their uncle to stage a mugging outside the Empress Gardens Chinese restaurant and kill Sharron Randolph.

Prosecutors alleged the **men** then cashed **in** on almost a quarter-million dollars **in** life insurance policies that Randolph had recently bought for his wife, although their marriage was on the rocks.

Randolph insisted a stranger attacked them.

Prosecutors and defense attorneys alike shook their heads at the conflicting verdicts. Shannon and Randolph stood together through the seven-week trial but their **cases** were considered by separate **juries**. Shannon, who was once diagnosed as mentally ill, was Randolph's former student.

Randolph's **jury** reached its verdict last week, but it was sealed to prevent tainting the Shannon **jury**'s deliberations. The Shannon **jury** came to its decision Monday afternoon, but it was not opened until Tuesday when both panels reconvened **in** Judge Deborah Tyner's packed courtroom.

In the first row sat Leonard Beatty Jr., the oldest of Sharron Randolph's three brothers, who doubled over with tears of joy when the guilty verdict was read.

"I was dismayed when the first verdict was read, but the Lord has other plans, I guess," Beatty said. "We always knew they did it."

Although the **juries** heard much of the same **case**, at times they were separated to hear testimony that pertained to an individual defendant -- something that may have led to the split decisions, said Assistant Prosecutor Steven Vitale.

But during the past seven weeks, both **juries** listened to the critical eyewitness account from Shannon's nephew, David Hutsell, who said he unknowingly drove his uncle to the restaurant and watched him shoot Sharron Randolph as she begged for her life.

And both **juries** heard Hutsell's sister, Sarah Norwood, describe how Shannon returned the night of Jan. 8, **1982**, to the house they shared on Ohio Street **in** Detroit spattered with blood.

Norwood also said she saw her uncle with large amounts of cash, delivered to the house by Randolph, before and after the killing.

Members of the two **juries** declined to reveal whether they believed or discounted testimony.

There was conflicting trial testimony. For instance, although the killing was on a cold January night, at one point Hutsell said it took place **in** late summer and another time on a warm, Indian summer evening.

And while relatives claimed they went to police after overcoming their fear of Shannon, defense lawyers said the accusations were grounded **in** old family feuds.

Still, Vitale said he believes Shannon committed the crime.

For Sharron Randolph's family, the mixed verdicts brought closure.

"It's like that cloud that I've been carrying around for a long time is gone," Beatty said. "It's not elation, it's peace."

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Caption: Photo ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

Thomas Randolph listens to the **jury** verdict with members of his defense team Tuesday in Pontiac. He was convicted of first-degree murder.

Sanirell Shannon is escorted out of the courtroom Tuesday after a **jury** found him not guilty in the **1982** death of Sharron Randolph.

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