

McPherson killer gets life behind prison bars

Defense attorney says he will appeal

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Murder 5-7-05
SAN FRANCISCO — A 21-year-old crack dealer was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole Friday for the murder of Hunter McPherson.



McPHERSON
Friday would
have been his
30th birthday

Clifton Terrell Jr., standing handcuffed at the waist and wearing orange jail sweats, showed no emotion as San Francisco Superior Court Judge John K. Stewart read the sentence. His attorney said he would file an appeal immediately.

McPherson, 27, was the son of Secretary of State and former state Sen. Bruce McPherson. Hunter McPherson, a Harbor High and UC Berkeley graduate, was shot in the chest as he and fiancée Alexa Savelle walked home from a friend's home on Mariposa Street in San Francisco's Potrero Hill neighborhood about 2 a.m. on Nov. 17, 2001.

"This is the sentence the family hoped for," prosecutor Harry Dorfman said after the sentencing. "This is the sentence my office hoped for."

Dorfman acknowledged that the investigation and trial took a long time, but that "this was the right result."

Defense attorney Steve Scherr said, "This was a very harsh sentence for a very serious crime."

Before the sentence was read, Scherr unsuccessfully argued

McPherson

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against imposing the maximum sentence of life without parole for Terrell, calling it an "extremely cruel sentence, worse than any sentence on the books, ... especially when (Terrell) was just over his 18th birthday (when he committed the crime.)"

The McPherson family was not in the courtroom Friday. Dorfman read an emotional statement from the family. The McPhersons faxed a copy of that statement to the Sentinel, which reads in part:

"We are not in court today to speak in person because it is very, very sad and difficult to see the face of Clifton Terrell Jr. He murdered our son in cold blood for no reason. ... Terrell chose to take his case to court, thinking he could lie his way to freedom.

"We were in court, along with our family and friends, listening to the details of the murder of our son. Terrell put us through additional, unneeded pain for more than three-and-a-half years. We watched him in court sit with a smug look on his face and watched him swagger in and out of court.

We can't look at that smug face and watch him swagger again.

"Hunter Bohan McPherson was the most God-loving, decent and compassionate person one could ever know. ... Hunter would be 30 years old today if Clifton Terrell Jr. had not shot him down without provocation on Nov. 17, 2001. Hunter would be married and likely the proud father of a child. ...

"Clifton Terrell Jr., you cannot imagine the pain and suffering you have caused Hunter's immediate and extended family, and the worst part about it is that you don't seem to feel any pain or sorrow for this most terrible of sins," the statement reads.

Several members of Terrell's extended family were in the courtroom. His brother and two cousins spoke on his behalf.

After the sentencing, Terrell's mother Sylvia Revetta said through tears that, "My son's not a murderer. ... They got the wrong guy."

Dorfman said the forthcoming appeal was "fully expected" and likely will hinge on the admission of the secretly taped phone call Terrell made to his mother from jail.

The case against Terrell, a high school dropout from a Potrero Hill

housing project who told the court he sold crack cocaine, hinged largely on that call. In it, a sobbing Terrell said he shot "a senator's son" by mistake after McPherson grabbed at the gun.

Saville said McPherson made no move toward the weapon. She testified McPherson refused several demands to give his wallet to the gunman, who stole her Gucci purse. She was unable to identify the killer, and no other witnesses were found. The gun was never recovered.

Prosecutors declined to seek the death penalty against Terrell, which he was eligible for because committing murder during the course of a robbery is a special circumstance under state law.

Prosecutors alleged Terrell and a friend randomly robbed three couples that night as they drove around the city, high on Ecstasy, marijuana and alcohol.

Twelve days after the shooting, police arrested Terrell, then 18, and Dwayne Reed, 25. They were charged with murder, robbery and other crimes.

In a largely circumstantial case, Reed was offered a deal by prosecutors to testify against his former friend in exchange for a sentence of three to 10 years in prison. He was released during the trial, after he told jurors that Terrell shot McPherson while he waited in the car.

Defense attorneys claimed Reed committed the murder, then pinned it on Terrell.

During the preliminary hearing on the charges, Judge Kay Tsenin ruled that statements the men made to police were inadmissible. The judge agreed with their attorneys that "overzealous" police had violated the men's rights during questioning.

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