



Death Row Profile: Guy LeGrande

By CDPL Staff

North Carolina still imprisons about 140 people on death row, even though its last execution was carried out in 2006. This is the first in a series of case profiles, illuminating the ways that modern death penalty cases still bear the hallmarks of North Carolina's racist legacy.

Guy LeGrande stood in front of the jury that had just been selected to decide whether he would live or die. He was psychotic and having delusions that Oprah Winfrey and Dan Rather were sending signals to him through the television. Yet, he saw clearly the problem with the jury.

“But there are no African Americans left,” LeGrande said after the prosecutor struck the last black person. The jury, the judge, the prosecutors and the defense lawyers — every last one was white. Like so many Black men before him, LeGrande’s fate would be held entirely in the hands of white people.

When LeGrande went on trial for murder in 1996, judges and prosecutors would have claimed that the death penalty was a color blind system, intended only to punish the most dangerous people who committed the worst crimes. But LeGrande’s case clearly reveals that the “modern” system that built today’s death row very often had the same motives as the old one. It remains a system run by and for white people, with a reflexive tendency to harshly punish crimes that crossed racial lines.

To claim that race played no role in cases like Guy LeGrande’s is to be willfully blind.

LeGrande was accused of killing a white woman, Ellen Munford, in Stanly County. Mrs. Munford’s estranged husband, Tommy Munford, wanted her dead so he could collect her life insurance, but he wanted someone else to do the job. Eventually, he found LeGrande, who Munford described at the trial as a “n[----]r from Wadesboro.”

LeGrande needed rent money to avoid being evicted from his home and had severe, untreated mental illness. Munford offered him \$6,500 to kill his wife, and LeGrande agreed. Munford gave LeGrande a gun and ammunition and then arranged his own alibi, a beach trip with the couple’s children. Munford drove LeGrande to some woods near Mrs. Munford’s house, dropped him off, then picked up his children and headed to the coast, leaving his wife home alone. After hours of sitting in the woods, LeGrande went into the house and shot Mrs. Munford.

Both Tommy Munford and LeGrande were caught almost immediately. The prosecutor who decided what punishment they would face was Ken Honeycutt, a prosecutor who sent several men of color to death row in the 1990s while using his strikes to ensure all-white juries. Honeycutt gained notoriety for wearing a gold lapel pin shaped like a noose, and for his efforts to boost morale by awarding the nooses to assistant district attorneys who won death sentences.

Honeycutt allowed Tommy Munford, a white man who took out an insurance policy on his wife's life and meticulously planned her killing, to plead guilty to second-degree murder. Munford could soon be eligible for parole. For LeGrande, a poor Black man with mental illness so severe that he couldn't distinguish reality from delusion, Honeycutt demanded the death penalty.

After securing an all-white jury at LeGrande's trial, Honeycutt appealed to them in not-so-subtly coded language, using a noose metaphor and all but inviting them to participate in a lynching. In his opening statement, Honeycutt described investigators twisting the strands of evidence into a rope. "A rope so strong that when this case is over, you will not have any reasonable doubt about this man's guilt." He then proceeded to call witnesses who referred to LeGrande as a "n[----]r" throughout the trial.

LeGrande never had a chance against Honeycutt, because the judge allowed him to represent himself. LeGrande stood in front of the jury wearing a Superman t-shirt, so profoundly ill that he believed he had the power to create hurricanes. He also believed he would receive a large cash settlement after being acquitted at his trial.

Lawyers appointed to be on "standby" filed a motion arguing he was incompetent, but when the judge asked LeGrande what he had to say, he tore the document in half. The judge then allowed the trial to proceed. LeGrande, already paranoid and distrustful of white people, became so agitated by the trial's clear racial overtones that he began referring to the white jurors as "antichrists." In his closing argument, he told the jury:

Hell ain't deep enough for you people. But you remember when you arrive, say my name, Guy Tobias LeGrande. For I shall be waiting. And each and every one of you will be mine for all eternity. And we shall dance in my father's house. And you will worship me and proclaim me Lord and master. But for right now, all you so-called good folks can kiss my natural black ass in the showroom window of Helig Meyers. Pull the damn switch and shake that groove thing.

The jury deliberated less than an hour before sentencing LeGrande to death. When he received an execution date in 2006, which was later called off, a Stanly County resident posted an internet comment calling for the execution of "this dumb n[----]r."

The state has since declared LeGrande incompetent to be executed. He still lives on death row while the state awaits the day when he is deemed sane enough to be killed.