

Teen's capital murder trial scheduled for Monday
By BRIAN HAWKINS/Starkville Daily News

Jury selection is scheduled to begin Monday morning in the capital murder trial of a West Point teenager charged in the shooting death of his half-sister's husband more than a year ago.

Tyler Edmonds, 14, 485 Oakcrest Circle, West Point, is scheduled to stand trial in the death of Joseph T. "Joey" Fulgham, 28, at the latter's home at 2163 Buckner St. in the Longview community on May 10, 2003.

Edmonds is charged along with his half-sister, Kristi Leigh Fulgham, 27, also of 2163 Buckner St., in Mr. Fulgham's death. Through a juvenile, Edmonds is being charged as an adult since Mr. Fulgham's death is being considered a capital crime under state law.

Edmonds' trial this week will be the first capital murder trial held in Oktibbeha County Circuit Court since August 2000. Previous capital murder cases have been scheduled, but the trials were postponed or the defendants entered guilty pleas.

The crime itself

Joey Fulgham's body was found May 11, 2003, by family members at his Buckner Street home -- located in the Longview community just southwest of Starkville -- lying face down in his bedroom with a gunshot wound to the head.

According to Sheriff's Department reports, Joey Fulgham was last seen by family members in the evening hours on May 9, 2003, and may have been seen in the pre-dawn hours on May 10, 2003.

Over the next day and a half, concerned family members made repeated phone calls to his home, and, after receiving no answer, went to his home late on May 11, 2003, reports state.

They noticed his car there and knocked on the door, reports state. When they could not get him to answer, family members walked to his bedroom window and saw him on the bed, but could not wake him despite repeated knocking on the window, reports state.

They then broke into his house and discovered him dead, the reports state. Family members called the Sheriff's Department at 6:51 p.m. May 11, 2003, reports state.

Kristi Fulgham was initially questioned Sunday night and was arrested following additional questioning on May 12, 2003. Edmonds was also arrested on May 12, 2003.

Under state law, slaying suspects may be charged with capital murder if the killing occurred during the commission of another crime. Investigators are alleging that a theft of money -- more than \$500 -- was the crime committed in connection with Joey Fulgham's death, Sheriff's Department officials have said previously.

The court phase

Both Mrs. Fulgham and Edmonds were indicted by the Oktibbeha County Grand Jury on individual charges of capital murder in July 2003.

Edmonds, though charged as an adult offender, would face a life sentence in prison if he is convicted in Mr. Fulgham's death since state law prohibits him from being sentenced to death because of his age.

Should Kristi Fulgham be convicted on the capital murder charge, she could face a life sentence in prison without parole or the death penalty. Her trial date has not been set.

Both Edmonds and Mrs. Fulgham have been held without bond in the Oktibbeha County Jail since their arrests by Sheriff's Department deputies on May 12, 2003.

Edmonds' attorney, Jim Waide of Tupelo, has repeatedly sought bond for his client, even filing motions before the Mississippi Supreme Court and the U.S. District Court in Oxford in the matter. Circuit Court Judge Jim Kitchens, who is presiding over the case, has denied bond, and prosecutors in the District Attorney's Office have sought rulings from the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, La.,

The Fifth Circuit Court has made a ruling on bond for Edmonds, but that ruling -- due to judicial orders at the local, state and federal level to seal all files related to the case amid concerns about media access and the impact publicizing certain information might have on Edmonds' ability to receive a fair trial -- is not being made public.

Waide and Assistant District Attorney Patricia Faver, who is prosecuting Edmonds, have been prohibited from discussing any matters related to the case under the state's rules of professional conduct for judicial matters. Many pretrial hearings dealing with evidence in the case have been closed to the media since mid-October 2003.

Edmonds' case has sparked interest from various juvenile justice advocacy groups, particularly those against trying children and teenagers as adults and holding them in adult jails and prisons. Local media outlets, including the Starkville Daily News, have been contacted in recent days by many of these organizations, including the Miracles of Hope Network Defense Foundation for Children.

The case has also attracted national media attention.

This past week, national cable television network Court TV, sent a letter to Kitchens asking to be allowed to televise Edmonds' trial. Another broadcast network has also reportedly expressed interest in the case, but has not filed any written requests, court officials said.

Kitchens had not ruled on Court TV's request as of last week, but did say he was inclined to give local television stations access to the courtroom. Court TV is available locally on satellite television providers, but not on Northland Cable Television, contrary to remarks made by a local attorney last week.