

Plea allows freedom in fatal 1996 shooting

March 7, 2009 - 10:00pm

Posted

After his murder conviction was overturned last year, Geovanny Torres hoped a second jury would find him innocent in the 1996 shooting death of a man outside a Las Vegas restaurant.

But as a new trial date drew closer and Torres remained behind bars, a chance at immediate freedom was too hard to pass up for a man once serving a life sentence in High Desert State Prison.

At a hearing Friday in Clark County District Court, Torres, 40, entered an Alford plea to a low-level felony charge stemming from the shooting that led to his first-degree murder conviction in 2000.



The plea to being an accessory to a crime carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison. Having already served nearly 10 years for murder, Torres, who fled Communist-ruled Cuba in the mid-1990s, has enough credit for time served to be released.

It's unclear what, if any, immigration consequences he'll face as a result of his Alford plea, which doesn't involve an admission of guilt but is generally viewed as a guilty plea by the courts.

Torres didn't make a statement at the hearing and wasn't available for comment afterwards.

Karen Connolly, Torres' attorney, said she advised her client not to take the deal.

"I thought he should go to trial and be vindicated," she said.

Chief Deputy District Attorney Christopher Laurent, who prosecuted Torres, declined comment Friday on the plea agreement.

At the conclusion of Friday's hearing, District Judge Elizabeth Gonzalez acknowledged the work of both attorneys on the case: "I know this has been a difficult case for all of us."

Torres was found guilty in 2000 of the 1996 murder of 30-year-old Alfonso Lazaro at El Matador restaurant on South Maryland Parkway.

In September, Gonzalez ordered a new trial for Torres after she learned that prosecutors failed to share key information about a witness who helped convict Torres at trial.

A few weeks later, the judge declined Connolly's request to have the entire case thrown out. She instead

ordered that Torres remain in custody on \$250,000 bond at the Clark County Detention Center pending a new trial.

At Torres' 2000 trial, the only witness to identify him as Lazaro's killer was a Florida man who lied about the benefits he got in his own criminal cases for cooperating against Torres.

Laurent repeatedly told jurors that the witness wasn't testifying as part of a plea agreement with prosecutors in Nevada or elsewhere.

The prosecution's strongest eyewitness to the killing testified that Torres' brother, Carlos, was the shooter, but murder charges against Carlos Torres were dropped after prosecutors got a conviction against Geovanny Torres.

Absent from the courtroom Friday were Torres' longtime fiancée, Connie Beljica, and their two young daughters, who had moved from Florida to Las Vegas to be closer to him. Financial problems forced them to return to Miami earlier this year.

Beljica said in a phone interview that she had mixed feelings about the outcome of the case: "I'm very happy that he has a chance to come home, but I'm disappointed that he didn't get to prove his innocence."

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