



# Convicted Killer Fights For Release Former Death Row Inmate Hopes New Trial Will Set Her Free

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By LANE KELLEY, Staff Writer

For 16 years, she was looking at a life in prison. Now, Sonia Jacobs is looking forward to life outside of prison.

She was 28 when she and her boyfriend, Jesse Tafero, were convicted in the shooting deaths of a Florida state trooper and an off-duty Canadian constable in 1976.

Now she is 45 and a grandmother. Originally sentenced to death with Tafero, she was the only woman on Death Row until 1981, when her sentence was commuted to life.

Her boyfriend is dead -- executed in 1990.

At issue is whether Jacobs took part when Trooper Phillip Black and Constable Donald Irwin were gunned down on Interstate 95 in Deerfield Beach after they stopped the car Jacobs was in.

Over the years, the evidence against her has grown murkier.

Witnesses who implicated her in the shootings have recanted their testimony. The main witness, Walter Rhodes, has spent the past decade recanting his recantations.

In February, a federal appeals court in Atlanta ordered a new trial. Now, Jacobs has a realistic chance of leaving the Broward Correctional Institution and going to Charlotte, N.C., to live with her son, Eric, who was 9 when she went to prison.

Her attorneys argue that the case against Jacobs is so weak that they are asking a judge to free her on bond while she awaits another trial.

"The state's case is in shambles, and she has been recommended for clemency by the prison system," said a bond motion filed last week. "She is entitled to (be) released on bond forthwith, if indeed not on her own recognizance."

The new trial should begin this fall in Broward Circuit Court. State Attorney Michael Satz, who prosecuted Jacobs in 1976, has said he may try the case again.

But not if Jacobs' defense attorneys get their way.

In the latest wrinkle, Jacobs' attorneys have said Satz and his office should be disqualified from prosecuting the case because Satz's chief assistant, Ralph Ray, was the defense attorney for Rhodes in 1976.

In a bond motion filed last Monday, Jacobs' attorney, Richard Strafer, said Rhodes' most recent recantation -- in September -- could have "fatal ramifications" for the state's case.

Rhodes has admitted he was at the murder scene; he cut a deal in 1976 that gave him a life sentence in return for testimony against Tafero and Jacobs.

Since then, he has changed his story repeatedly, sometimes saying that he was the gunman. Now Rhodes says Jacobs and Tafero did kill Black and Irwin -- repeating the story he told at trial in 1976.

According to that story, Jacobs, her two children -- Eric and Christina, then 10 months old -- and Tafero left Fort Lauderdale with Rhodes for West Palm Beach. They were going to sell drugs.

At 2 a.m., they pulled Rhodes' 1968 Camaro into a rest stop to sleep. Five hours later, Black, 39, and Irwin, also 39, stopped by the car.

Irwin, on vacation with his family, was riding with Black to witness law enforcement American-style.

Black saw a gun, which belonged to Rhodes, on the floorboard of the Camaro. Black asked Tafero and Jacobs for identification, got her purse and found a bag of marijuana and a shoulder holster. The trooper told everyone to get out of the car.

According to this Rhodes story, Jacobs fired the first two shots, then Tafero grabbed her pistol and fired four more. Two truckers who were parked at the rest stop said they heard Black scream, "Oh God, I've been shot!"

Black and Irwin were dead at the scene. Jacobs, her children, Tafero and Rhodes were caught a few hours later at a roadblock in Boynton Beach. Rhodes was shot in the leg; the others were captured without incident.

However, Rhodes' later recantations cast doubt on that story, Strafer said.

"Rhodes still cannot keep his story straight," Strafer said in the bail motion. "For example, he now claims that he met Jesse Tafero for the first time a few weeks before the incident at the rest stop. He has previously sworn that he first met Tafero in prison back in 1973."

Further, Rhodes said in his latest story that Ray, his defense attorney at the time, was a “drunk” and sold him out to the prosecution, according to Strafer’s motion.

“We assume that the state will take the position that its chief assistant (Ray) was not a drunkard, was not in cahoots with prosecutor Satz when he represented Rhodes as his defense attorney, and was not incompetent,” Strafer said in the motion.

Strafer said he assumes that Satz and Ray will label Rhodes, once their star witness, as a liar.

“Accordingly, prosecutors Satz and Ray have now become essential trial witnesses for Jacobs,” Strafer said in the motion. “Rhodes’ allegations attack both Satz and Ray personally and professionally, they and their office have conflicts of interest preventing them from trying to ‘convince’ Rhodes to withdraw the allegations.”

Satz did not return phone calls, but Ray did.

“I certainly don’t want to give any credence to their allegations and discuss them with you,” he said. “I think they’re absurd.”