

Stuart News, The (FL){PUBLICATION2}

Date: October 22, 1999

Section: Local

Edition: Martin County

Page: B6

Column:

Memo:

Memo2:

Correction:

MANSLAUGHTER VERDICT A SURPRISE

Byline: *Karen Testa Associated Press writer*

Source:

A jury convicted Ryan Harris of a lesser charge for inciting a teenager to shoot Elizabeth Hatfield 12 times in an Okeechobee mobile home. WEST PALM BEACH - Before closing arguments began Thursday morning, attorneys for Ryan Harris were prepared to make a deal: a guilty plea to second-degree murder in exchange for 20 years in prison.

That deal would avert a possible life sentence without parole if the jury found Harris guilty of inciting his Satan-worshipping friend to shoot his ex-lover Elizabeth Hatfield 12 times as she slept near their infant daughter in an Okeechobee mobile home.

But as they had to previous offers, Hatfield's family said no deal.

And just a few hours later, a jury picked in Palm Beach County returned a verdict that surprised attorneys for both sides, one that means Harris could be out of jail by the time he's 30: guilty of the less serious charge of manslaughter.

"I'm never surprised with a decision that happens in life," said a disappointed Christine Lowe, Hatfield's mother. "Certainly I can live with it. I've lived with it for four and a half years."

Hatfield, 18, was shot to death in the early morning of March 14, 1995, by Kevin Cutts, who was then 17. Cutts is serving a life sentence after admitting to the slaying and agreeing to testify against Harris.

Harris was earlier convicted of second-degree murder. But an appeals court overturned the verdict and ordered a new trial.

This time around, Harris, now 23, took the stand and told jurors he was the victim of "some kind of plot." He accused witnesses of lying and the prosecutor of tampering with evidence.

But prosecutors said Harris was no victim. They alleged Harris had programmed Cutts for the killing, giving him the weapon, telling him where to aim for the greatest effect and feeding him false stories of child abuse and neglect to incite anger against Hatfield.

Harris, then 18, knew Cutts was "a Satanic-worshipping 17-year-old who was fixated on murder and morbidity," said prosecutor Bruce Harrison.

"Ryan Harris was preparing Kevin Cutts as his tool," Harrison said.

Cutts testified the boys staked out Hatfield's trailer, checking for phone lines they could cut. And they mulled over plots to poison her or run her down before settling on a plan to shoot her, Cutts said.

Listening from the defense table, Harris denied the allegations, then hung his head and sobbed.

It was Cutts' testimony in part that prompted defense attorneys to seek a plea bargain. However, the defense

insisted that Cutts acted alone in the slaying.

"Our fear was if this went down bad, it was a true life sentence," Udell said.

On the day of the shooting, prosecutors said Cutts, Harris and Heather Brown, a friend, drove to Hatfield's house with a baseball bat to break a window, a police scanner to check for trouble and a 9mm gun taken from Harris' father.

When Cutts hesitated in the car, Harris cocked the weapon and put it in Cutts' hand, saying "Just do it," prosecutor Ashley Albright said.

Police said they found the murder weapon in Harris' home the next day.

Prosecutors said they were disappointed with the verdict but refused to comment further. Harris' parents, who hugged his defense attorneys, also declined to comment.

"They're overwhelmed," said defense attorney **Lance Richard**.

It will take some time for Harris to find the victory in the verdict, added attorney Robert Udell. He could have faced life without parole.

"Ryan would have liked to walk out the door with his mom and dad right now," he said.

The trial was moved from Okeechobee to Palm Beach County because of concerns publicity would make it difficult to find an impartial jury.

Illustration:

Caption:

Chart: