

Written by Kathy

Wednesday, 14 December 2022 19:41 - Last Updated Friday, 30 December 2022 17:50



Pictured is Omnisun Azali

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By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor-in-chief

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The son of a Black Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas judge was sentenced Wednesday for murdering his wife in May of 2021 in a case that has drawn national attention.

Visiting and retired Judge Patricia Cosgrove sentenced Omnisun Azali, 36 of Euclid who was indicted on several felony charges and faced 15-years to life on the murder conviction alone, to life in prison with the possibility of parole in 21 years for shooting and killing his wife, Mzaka Azali. She took the liberty to chastise him before she sentenced him to time behind bars, saying he had taken the life of a young mother and wife unnecessarily.

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Following a two week long trial a Cuyahoga County common pleas jury at the justice center in downtown Cleveland on Friday found Azali guilty of murder, felonious assault, domestic violence and several other felony charges, all but aggravated murder, which requires a finding of prior intent. The jury deliberated for 10 hours before reaching its stinging verdict.

Azali appeared for sentencing in casual attire. He was brought up to the court from the county jail where he has been held in custody since last week's jury convictions. Prior to that he had been free after posting 10 percent of a \$900,000 bond after arraignment in 2021.

The murder occurred at the couple's home in Euclid in the 100 block of E. 265th Street on May 26, 2021. A lower to middle class Cleveland suburb of nearly 50,000 people, the city of Euclid is roughly 62 percent Black.

The Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner ruled Mwaka's death a homicide.

Prosecutors said little at sentencing and instead pointed to his wife's sister, Rebecca Tawana,

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who told the visiting judge via Zoom that her family was heartbroken over her sister's death and that their mother was "shattered." She added that her sister was a loving mother and said "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

The dead woman's family spoke to the court by Zoom because they live overseas.

The defendant's mother, Common Pleas Judge Cassandra Collier Williams, also spoke. She reiterated that her son acted in self defense and then turned and looked at her son and said "I am proud of everything that you have done." Her son, the defendant, did not speak likely, say sources, because his attorneys have vowed to appeal. A source said that Collier -Williams, a likable judge, did everything she could do within reason to try to save the life of her son, whom she told the court she loved dearly, as well as his family. Domestic violence advocates say Azali is a coward, and should have just walked away. His hired attorneys said at trial that his troubled wife gave him no alternative but to shoot and kill her in self defense.

With his mother's support, Azali claimed his innocence from the very beginning He testified at trial that he shot his African wife three times in the head in self-defense because she pointed a gun at him and that prior to doing that she had shot three times in the house with the same gun. He told jurors that his wife had argued with him and had punched him in the face before he shot and killed her.

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He continued testifying and said that after killing his wife he contacted his mother by phone rather than initially calling police and then left the home with the couple's two children and drove to her home. The judge later called 9-1-1 and then road with him back to the couple's Euclid home where police met them and arrested him on murder and other charges. He was later indicted by a county grand jury.

The office of Summit County Prosecutor Sherry Belwin- Walsh, a tough and seasoned prosecutor, prosecuted the case for the state in place of Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Mike O'Malley because Collier-Williams is a Cuyahoga County judge. Also, the judge's colleagues on the bench refused to hear the case, saying, like O'Malley, that it would be a conflict of interest.

Judge Cosgrove, the retired visiting judge who presided over the case, was assigned by the Ohio Supreme Court after Collier-Williams' judicial colleagues bowed out.

The case was intriguing from the start because it involved murder charges against the son of a sitting judge.

Defense counsel Jeffery Saffold, Common Pleas Judge Shirley Strickland-Saffold's son who won election to the common pleas bench in November, said in opening statements at trial that the shooting was in self-defense and that Mwaka Azali was reaching for a pistol when Omnisun Azali shot her with his own gun. Saffold was consulted as a potential defense counsel before the judge's son was even charged and arrested by Euclid police, prosecutors said at trial,

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though that is not, in isolation, illegal.

Authorities found two guns in the home where the murder occurred, including a .380 caliber handgun next to Mwaka Azali's body, the latter gun of which had her DNA on the trigger, investigators said at trial.

Prosecutors argued at trial that Mwaka Azali's wounds and two bullet holes found in the home were inconsistent with self-defense and accused the judge, who took the stand at trial, of a cover-up of her son's murder of his wife. Prosecutors told jurors that the judge called attorney Saffold, who was later hired as defense counsel, and then waited 15 minutes to call 9-1-1 after her son and the couple's children arrived at her home after the murder. The judge, however, kept her composure under intense questioning from prosecutors, and she testified that she acted in her best judgment.

Police found bullet holes in the wall that were fired from Mwaka Azali's .380-caliber pistol, which was found on the ottoman next to her body on the couch. But that was not enough for the jury to acquit the judge's son, particularly after prosecutors called the couple's two children, an eight-year-old son and nine year-old daughter, to the stand at trial and the son testified that he saw his father point the gun at his mother and that his mother did not have a gun. In fact, the testimony of the judge's grandson was the smoking gun that broke the case wide open, sources said after trial.

Neither of the defendant's two children witnessed the tragic murder of their mother, who struggled with mental health issues, defense counsel said at trial.

Cuyahoga County judge's son sentenced in Cleveland for murdering his wife...The judge spoke at sentencing

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Domestic violence relative to the couple was no secret, sources said.

Collier-Williams is currently one of three Black judges on the 34-member largely White general division common pleas bench in Cuyahoga County, Ohio's second largest of its 88 counties and a county that includes the majority Black city of Cleveland and is a Democratic stronghold.

By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor-in-chief (Coleman is a former biology teacher and a seasoned Black journalist, and an investigative, legal, scientific, and political reporter who trained for 17 years at the Call and Post Newspaper in Cleveland, Ohio).

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