

# Parker found guilty, given life sentence

By ANGELA M. CASTELUCCI  
Managing Editor

A six-man, six-woman jury deliberated just over two hours Wednesday evening before returning a “guilty” verdict in the first degree murder trial of Raymond “Little Ray” Parker Jr. for the February 2016 death of his former girlfriend, Colleen Thomas of Steinhatchee.

The jury also found Parker guilty of the two other top counts in the indictment

against him, burglary and aggravated stalking.

Court bailiff Marty Nowlin alerted Circuit Judge Greg Parker that the jury had reached a verdict at 8 p.m. following two days of evidence presentations and witness testimonies.

(Ray) Parker showed no emotion as Assistant Clerk of Court Gary Knowles pronounced the judgment.

However, the same could not be said for a handful of jurors whose faces clearly

expressed the toll of making such a weighty decision.

Emotions were also high on both sides of the aisle, with family members of the victim and suspect breaking into tears when the verdict was read.

Judge Parker thanked jurors for their service and commended them on the care they showed in being attentive to the evidence presented throughout the trial.

He shook each jurors

hand as they exited the courtroom before returning to the bench to address (Ray) Parker’s sentencing.

(Ray) Parker’s attorney Elise Blair Yates said her client was prepared for sentencing without delay.

Assistant State Attorney James McCain said the state would be seeking a life sentence for the burglary charge and five years imprisonment for

➔ Please see page 3



Ray Parker, center, remained stoic throughout the trial. Both he and his attorneys, Elise Blair Yates and Nathan Marshburn, showed little reaction when jurors handed down a guilty verdict.



Shelly, Hannah, Noah and Rudy Blanco take part in a family hug that perfectly captures their care-free, fun-loving attitude.

## ‘All is well’ Rudy is home!

By AARON PORTWOOD

“All is well.”

“Do you trust me? All is well. Sleep in peace tonight and thank God for all of His blessings.”

That was the text Shelly Blanco received from one of three attorneys working frantically to prevent her husband, Rudy, from being deported to Cuba after spending nearly three months in an ICE detention facility in Wakulla County.

On Thursday, the same

day he was scheduled to be on a deportation flight back to Cuba, Rudy is instead sitting at his dining room table, smiling and laughing with his wife of 22 years, daughter Hannah and son Noah.

Known for his habit of talking with his hands, it did not take long to notice a new tattoo on his right bicep – and matching ones on the arms of his wife and daughter.

“All is well.”

Those three words are

permanently inked on the arms of the local family (except for his son, who opted for a palm tree) who are now giving thanks to the Taylor County community that rallied around them in their time of need.

Blanco, who fled Cuba during the mass immigration known as the Mariel boatlift and arrived in Florida as a 7-year-old in 1980 with nothing but a pair of

➔ Please see page 7

### News Forum

#### FSU vs. Alabama at Rosehead Park

Watch the opening week match-up between the Florida State University Seminoles and University of Alabama Crimson Tide at Rosehead Park on Saturday, Sept. 2.

The game, which begins at 8 p.m., will be displayed at the park’s amphitheater.

Admission is free and the public is invited to attend.

#### Stephens Spring grand opening is today from 4-7 p.m.

A grand opening ceremony for Stephens Spring in Steinhatchee will be held today (Friday) from 4-7 p.m.

The restoration project was spearheaded by the Steinhatchee AARP and funded through community contributions and a \$97,000 grant from the Suwannee River Water Management District.

#### Enrollment open for Head Start

Community Development Institute (CDI) Head Start, the interim provider of Head Start education and services in Taylor County, is now accepting applications.

Parents interested in enrolling their children with CDI Head Start are asked to visit 115B East Drew Street or call (850) 838-6850. The office is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

More information can be found at [www.cdihedstart.org/taylorcounty](http://www.cdihedstart.org/taylorcounty).



## Hurricane Hermine ONE YEAR LATER

With the country focused on the devastating flooding resulting from Hurricane Harvey in Texas and Louisiana, this week marks the one-year anniversary of another H-storm which flooded the Taylor County coastline.

Hurricane Hermine, the first hurricane to hit Florida in 11 years, was the strongest and most devastating storm to strike Taylor County since the 1993 Storm of the Century, producing a 10-foot tidal surge which inundated the

coast as well as high winds that knocked out power for most of the county.

The system made landfall Sept. 2, 2016, along the Big Bend coast between St. Marks and the Aucilla River with maximum sustained winds of 80 mph.

The hurricane damaged scores of homes and business along the coast and destroyed several public landmarks including the Hodges Park pier at Keaton Beach.

One year later, some residents are still waiting

for reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) while, county officials are seeking \$1.1 million from FEMA. Additional reflections will be included in next week’s **Taco Times**.

## ‘It was hell’

By MARK VIOLA  
General Manager

“It was absolute hell.”

That’s the immediate response from Doctors’ Memorial Hospital Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Director Albert “Mac” Leggett when asked about the night Hurricane Hermine struck Taylor County.

Facing hurricane-strength winds, first responders rescued 19 people from the coast during the storm.

➔ Please see page 12

## County waiting for FEMA funds

One year after Hurricane Hermine flooded the Taylor County coastline and produced winds toppling trees throughout the community, local officials are still waiting for payment to reimburse the more than \$1 million in taxpayer funds spent to repair the damage.

Once the federal government makes a public disaster declaration--separate from individual declarations allowing homeowners and businesses to apply--local

governments are eligible for reimbursement of expenses incurred due to the disaster, with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) providing 75 percent and the State of Florida providing 12.5 percent.

According to Taylor County Emergency Management Director Steve Spradley, the Taylor County government is eligible to receive \$1,141,000 from

➔ Please see page 12



Donations of supplies--both big and small--for those affected by Hurricane Harvey were delivered to a waiting semi-trailer in the Walmart parking lot Thursday. The truck is expected to remain at the location until it is filled.

## Community rallies to help Harvey victims

One year to the week after the Taylor County community rallied together to help those affected by Hurricane Hermine, they are doing so again to gather

supplies for the victims of Hurricane Harvey.

Several donation drives are now active, spearheaded by a variety of groups, including the Taylor County

Sheriff’s Office (TCSO), Burns Funeral Home and New Brooklyn Missionary Baptist Church.

➔ Please see page 12

# Judge vacated 1998 sentence

**RUDY**  
Continued from page 1

underwear and a t-shirt, was raised in the Florida Keys. He and Shelly moved to Perry (her hometown) and built a successful construction business while raising a close-knit, outgoing family over the past 14 years. That life was shattered in May when a change in political immigration policy and an old deportation order resulted in Rudy being suddenly detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials during a routine mandatory check-in. This started what Shelly describes as “the worst roller coaster ride in the world,” as Rudy was suddenly ripped away from his family and business. Rudy was told very little while being held in an ICE detention facility in Wakulla County. In fact, when he was temporarily released home with an ankle monitor for 20 days (Aug. 2-22), he was surprised when the van took a right into the ICE office in Tallahassee instead of left to the airport, where a plane was waiting to fly other detainees out of the country. Those 20 days of freedom were sweet, but short-lived, as his ankle monitor went

off while he was on his way to work the morning of Tuesday, Aug. 22, and he was soon told his appeal for a stay of deportation had been denied. Within two hours, Rudy was placed back in cuffs and shackles and whisked away to the Krome Service Processing Center in Miami – his final stop before being flown back to Cuba. But, on Monday, Shelly was in a Monroe County courtroom as a judge heard a motion to vacate Rudy’s sentence from when he pled “no contest” to drug charges dating back to a 1997 arrest as a young man in the Keys. According to Rudy, he followed the advice of his attorney and pled no contest to two counts of possession of cocaine and was sentenced to 12 months of probation and community service. Little did he know this would place his immigration status in limbo for the next 13 years and result in an order that pushed him to within hours of deportation --until Monroe County Chief Judge Mark Jones officially vacated his 1998 sentence on Tuesday. In setting aside Rudy’s conviction, Jones ruled Blanco received ineffective counsel in the drug case and appeal, which was a

violation to his constitutional right to “effective assistance of counsel” under the Sixth Amendment. Blanco was released from ICE custody on Tuesday and drove all night to arrive home in Perry early Wednesday morning. On Thursday, words of thankfulness poured out in the family’s living room, as Rudy, Shelly, daughter Hannah and son Noah expressed their gratitude for those who made his homecoming possible. Shelly gave thanks to God for answered prayers, pulling out a scrap of paper with Proverbs 3:5-6 handwritten in pencil: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” Rudy thanked the Wakulla County Correctional Chaplain Billy Brock, stating, “He helped keep my head on straight.” Hundreds of “character” letters in support of Rudy poured in and were read by ICE administrators and others. “Those letters really made a difference,” Shelly said, “They told us that they did read them, and that what people said about him was



Shelly, Rudy and Hannah Blanco show off the matching “All is well” arm tattoos they received after Rudy was released from ICE custody.

taken into consideration. “They saw my character and how the community pulled together and a lot of voices spoke up on my behalf,” Rudy said. Rudy and Shelly praised those in the community who not only prayed for Rudy’s release and supported the family emotionally, but also reached out to help financially. Shelly thanked all of those who made donations to the GoFundMe account set up by Ashley McCormick, which helped cover one-third of the legal bills incurred by two immigration attorneys and a criminal lawyer who worked on Rudy’s cause. With Rudy unable to run the family business to generate income--while racking up more than \$2,500 in telephone charges (at .20 cents per minute) instructing his wife and son on how to run the business, \$40 per week in commissary charges for personal hygiene items and Shelly spending \$54 every two days in gas traveling to Wakulla--the family was forced to sell their boat and RV to make ends meet. Their home is now up for sale, in part to help pay some of the bills incurred during his detainment, Blanco said.

“I was blessed in that I had a little saved up, but the key word there is ‘had,’ because that is gone,” Rudy said. “I don’t want to sell the house, but we need to downsize anyway.” “I am also very blessed that I had two of my customers--John Morris and Charlotte Clark and Cody and Charlene Stephens--who kept my crew working while I was away,” Rudy said. “That means a lot to me. Not to mention my son, who stepped up and did a good job keeping the business running, and his bosses (Mark Massey and Nick Harvey of AMEC-Foster Wheeler), who let him step away from his job and kept their word to hire him back when I was released,” Rudy said. “I was plucked right out of my life I have known for 40 years and ripped away from my family. They drill it into you that you are never going home. You are being deported,” Rudy said. “If it was not for Shelly coming to see me every day --she never missed a day, and that meant the world to me--I don’t know if I would have made it. That helped me keep my mind right,” Rudy added.

Rudy and Shelly also extended thanks to the correctional officers at Wakulla Correctional for their kindness and support. “They were very professional and went above and beyond to treat us with dignity and respect,” Rudy said. “All in all, I take more positives out of this than negatives. We all have bad days. In the past, I probably had less bad days than most people, but I still had bad days. But, I can guarantee you that I will never have a bad day going forward, because when I look back on what I have been through, there will be no bad days,” Rudy said. The family and attorneys will continue to pursue legal U.S. citizenship for Rudy, who must file an appeal to officially remove the deportation order, then apply to reinstate his residency status and finally ask that the “hold” on his previously-filed citizenship application can finally be lifted. “But, I don’t care if we have to live in a shoe box...as long as it is a shoe box here in this country,” Rudy said, adding, “Taylor County...you are stuck with this Cuban for a long time!” For now...“All is Well.”



Shelly and Rudy Blanco (front) receive big hugs from close family friends Kasey and Bryan Roberts (back).

# Victim was stabbed, then strangled with USB cord

**WITNESS**  
Continued from page 3

he watches the dog and trail,” Cash said. He related that it was around 10:37 p.m. when he and other officers attempted to make contact with Parker at his home. “We went up to the residence and tried to get someone to come to the door. We knocked like we were the sheriff’s office. We knocked and knocked, and announced loudly we were there. We looked around and that’s when we saw a man in a reclining chair next to the window. He appeared to be unconscious. I beat on that window almost to the point of breaking it to get him to move and he didn’t move. I saw there was vomit on his front, so we called for EMS (emergency medical services) and entered the house through the back door. We couldn’t get him to respond. EMS took him from the scene,” Cash said. “Where did the trail end?” Yates asked the officer. “It ended at a residence,” he said. “Did you speak to that person?” “Yes.” “Did you pass his name on (to investigators) to follow up?” “I’m not sure,” Cash said. A crime scene analyst with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) detailed evidence he collected at the scene, including swabs of suspected blood found on the bed, blinds, floor and walls. He also collected a broken knife blade found near Thomas’ body as well as a knife handle found after her body was moved and a cell phone found on a

nightstand. The analyst also swabbed red stains that appeared to be blood on the fence near the area Batie testified she saw Parker jump over. The FDLE analyst stated he also collected evidence from Parker’s residence at 712 Third Street in Steinhatchee, including suspected bloody fingerprints found on the vehicle Parker drove, as well as swabs from suspected blood stains found inside and outside of the truck. Summer Summers, who worked with Thomas at Crabbie Dad’s, testified she observed Parker parking across the street from the bar and watching Thomas. She also recounted an incident when she and Thomas were at a local restaurant and, when they came back from visiting the restroom, found Parker sitting at their table, uninvited. Summers also testified that Parker was in the bar the night Thomas was killed. “He was sitting there staring at Colleen. I asked if he wouldn’t leave until Colleen got off, and he told me ‘I don’t give a (expletive) what you think,’” she said. “Did you see Colleen change behavior when Ray was outside?” McCain asked. “She was scared. One time I asked her to go to the store, but when she turned around and saw he was sitting in Roy’s (Restaurant) parking lot, she wouldn’t leave to go to the store,” Summers said. “You never liked Mr. Parker did you?” Yates’ co-counsel Nathan Marshburn asked Summers under cross. “Oh no, I used to like him. Not now,” she replied. “Wouldn’t you say anything to get him convicted?”

“No, I would not,” Summers said. Also introduced into evidence was surveillance video from a nearby marina that captured footage of Parker’s truck the night of the murder, placing him near the scene. An FDLE DNA analyst testified that the stain found on the fence surrounding Batie’s rented cottage was Thomas’ blood; he also stated that both Thomas’ and Parker’s DNA were found inside the bloody glove recovered at the crime scene. The frequency of occurrence to the combined DNA profile was “one in 17 million,” the analyst testified. Senior FDLE Crime Analyst Jennifer Roeder testified she examined Thomas’ phone, generating reports of call logs and texts. The report showed escalating attempts by Parker to contact Thomas, with calls ranging from three to four a day up to 10 calls and/or texts a day. Associate medical examiner Dr. Lisa Flannigan, who stated she had conducted more than 4,000 autopsies during her career, detailed the extent of Thomas’ injuries and cause of death. “The stab wound in her neck penetrated about two inches. One of the stab wounds went through her arm, into her armpit, through her chest and struck a lung. The two stab wounds in her chest struck her left lung,” Flannigan said. Regarding the cord wrapped around Thomas’ neck, the doctors stated “the evidence was consistent with strangulation. There were ligature marks and, internally, fractures in the cartilage in her neck. The cause of death was



Assistant State Attorney John Weed, right, hands Senior FDLE Crime Analyst Jennifer Roeder a copy of the phone logs generated from her download of the victim’s cell phone records.

asphyxiation due to ligature strangulation. Contributing factors were the stab wounds,” she said. Flannigan was the state’s final witness; the defense rested its case without presenting any witnesses. In closing arguments, McCain stated, “The defendant loved Colleen Thomas and she rejected him ... there is evidence of premeditation, he didn’t park in front of (Thomas’ house), he walked to Colleen Thomas’ house. The track led officers to a driveway down the road. He came armed. He brought a knife and he intended to use that knife. When the knife broke, the defendant changed weapons. He used a USB cord (to strangle her).” In her closing, Yates asked, “Where’s the blood? Where’s the DNA? The state said there is overwhelming physical evidence—it’s not there. Let’s go through the witnesses. Michelle Batie had it in her mind that it

was Ray Parker before she even knew what she saw. She didn’t like Ray and she didn’t want to say that. Officers didn’t bother to get the name of a suspect, even through the trail ended at his house. What you didn’t see is that the shoe impression found by the fence didn’t match Mr. Parker’s boots ... Ms. Summers is emotionally invested in this case. But she can’t remember 30 minutes ago, how can she remember what happened months ago? Don’t let emotions cloud the facts. Inv. Davis never told Mr. Parker that Colleen was dead and he (Parker) talked about her in the present tense, not the past. Yes, Mr. Parker was upset when Mr. Davis interviewed him, but he was upset because his girlfriend had left him. That doesn’t mean he killed her. He said ‘loves,’ not ‘loved.’ Mr. Parker’s DNA was not on the USB cord, not on the knife, not on her clothes. He wasn’t there. “Tunnel vision (by police) led to a bad investigation. It

was Mr. Parker or bust. Mr. Parker did not kill Colleen Thomas. The evidence is there to show you that too. They have tried to show you what a bad boyfriend Ray Parker was, but that doesn’t make him a killer.” In his rebuttal, McCain’s co-counsel, Assistant State Attorney John Weed, said, “There is a fine line between love and hate. If you are rejected, love can turn to hate. The defendant and Ms. Thomas were together for seven years. He wanted her back, but he couldn’t get her back. The anger kept bubbling underneath the surface. It is clear from the text messages and communications that he was obsessed with Colleen and he couldn’t let that obsession go. “The Flowers testified they were trying to help Ray Parker get his life back in order. He was down in the dumps, he was at the bottom and had nothing to lose. All of that boiled over on Feb. 9.”