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Drug ring leader found guilty

VENICE BUHAIN; The Olympian

OLYMPIA - A man who beat a murder rap 12 years ago and who, police say, ran Thurston County's largest crack-cocaine ring, faces decades in prison after a judge found him guilty Thursday in a murder-for-hire plot and for leading organized crime.

Superior Court Judge Chris Pomeroy found Damien Darnell Harris, 34, guilty of leading organized crime, first-degree solicitation to commit murder, two counts of money laundering, maintaining a dwelling for drug purposes, two counts of unlawful delivery of cocaine, and unlawful possession of cocaine.

Harris had waived his right to a jury trial. He is scheduled to be sentenced Nov. 19 and faces between 26 and 30 years in prison, prosecuting attorney Scott Jackson said.

The verdict was the culmination of 18 months of investigation by the Thurston County Narcotics Task Force, Lt. Loreli Thompson said.

A number of other people involved in the ring also were convicted of related offenses, including delivering cocaine and tampering with witnesses.

"This is an extensive investigation that took an incredible amount of time and resources to complete, but it was worth it given the long history of interactions that law enforcement (have had) with Harris and his connections with illegal drug activity," Thompson said.

Jackson argued that Harris sold crack cocaine twice to an informant in April 2008. Investigators say that while Harris was incarcerated for violating his parole, he offered an associate "thousands" of dollars to kill the informant. The offer was made in a letter and over the phone. Police say Harris also phoned a girlfriend and another friend to collect money and drugs from a rented room on Olympia's west side, and to persuade the woman who kept the apartment not to cooperate with police. The woman told police that Harris' girlfriend threatened her.

Another complicating factor was that witnesses feared Harris and required more protection than normal, Detective Matt Renschler said.

Harris' history of run-ins with law enforcement in Thurston County include an acquittal by jury in 1997 of first-degree aggravated murder in connection with the death of 18-year-old Lamar Alexander, court records show. Alexander had been slated to testify against Harris in a weapons case, according to news reports at the time.

The man who pleaded guilty to killing Alexander testified against Harris in the Alexander case and was sentenced to 13 years in prison.

"Since that trial, he had a reputation that enabled him to do a lot of things, because very few people were willing to cross him or betray him because they were scared," Renschler said.

"It was one of the more significant drug-trafficking organizations, based on the notoriety of the people involved and the long-standing reputation of the primary suspect," Renschler said. "What made them significant and a major accomplishment to the task force was the amount of influence on people they had in that drug culture based upon their reputations for violence."

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