

Stocks changes plea, gets 3 life sentences

By **MARK CARTER**

Leader Staff

Stoically, accused killer Heath Stocks officially became an admitted murderer Friday morning in Lonoke County Circuit Court.

Stocks, 20, reached an agreement with county officials in which he changed his plea from not guilty for the Jan. 17 shooting deaths of his mother Barbara, 43; father Joe, 46; and sister Heather Stocks, 18, in their rural Furlow home.

Stocks, represented by public defenders Mac Carder and Edward Thompson, was charged with three counts of capital murder, and could have been facing the death penalty if convicted. But in exchange for his guilty plea, Stocks was sentenced by Circuit Judge Lance Hanshaw to three consecutive sentences of life in prison without the possibility for parole.

Hanshaw asked Stocks if he was changing his plea on each of the three counts because he was guilty. As family members, friends, and others who filled the courtroom listened, Stocks quietly answered "Yes sir" to each question.

Prosecuting Attorney Larry Cook said Stocks' maternal and paternal grandparents were instrumental in the plea bargain being reached. Annie Mae and Elwood Harris and Dorothy and Martin Stocks each lobbied Cook not to seek the death penalty.

Cook said their insistence, along with the support of law enforcement officials involved in the case, that the death penalty not be sought swayed him.

"This brings some finality to it," he said minutes after the sentencing, as Stocks was led out of the courthouse, clad in a bullet-proof vest, to be handed over to state correction department officials.

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"The circumstances being what they are, it's better not to drag this all out in court," Cook added.

Stocks shot each member of his immediate family with a .45 caliber handgun inside their Johnson Road home the night of Jan. 17. Authorities believe he was in the process of burglarizing the home when his sister, a Lonoke High cheerleader and class valedictorian, came home from a basketball game about 10:30 p.m.

His parents arrived home shortly thereafter, but not before two calls were made to 911 from the Stocks home. Investigators concluded that Heather Stocks made the calls to report that the home had been burglarized, in an attempt to help her brother.

When Joe and Barbara Stocks arrived home, an argument broke out and Stocks shot each family member to death, the investigation concluded.

Heath Stocks then drove to Arkadelphia, where he had been enrolled at Henderson State University, and threw the gun in the Ouachita River. It was recovered the next day, as was some jewelry Heath Stocks took from the home. He was arrested that weekend in Arkadelphia.

It was generally known that Heath Stocks had not been on good terms with his father, at least in part because of the former's dropping out of

school. Affidavits filed with the court revealed that Stocks admitted having walked into his parents' bedroom one night with a gun, and considered shooting them then.

Stocks original arraignment, at which he pleaded not guilty, was delayed until April 8 pending a state mental evaluation to determine his competency to stand trial. Stocks was found to be capable of standing trial.

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