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Landaeta guilty: Jury decides quickly in San Carlos beheading trial

By Holly Rusch, Daily Journal staff Nov 21, 2023 Updated Dec 29, 2023 2

Jose Rafael Solano Landaeta was found guilty of first degree murder with a deadly weapon Monday, Nov. 20.

Photo by Nicholas Mazzoni

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"I'm as happy as I can be," Martin Castro, the victim's father, said. "I was pretty sure this would go down like this, but just to hear it in reality reverberating, it doesn't bring him back, but at least he's now being shown that he can't get away with whatever he wants."

Landaeta, 33, brutally killed Castro, 27, nearly beheading her with a samurai sword in San Carlos on Sept. 8, 2022. He originally pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity in May after being found competent to stand trial, and his defense has previously invoked several claims of imperfect self-defense by a man with mental health issues.

Prosecutor Josh Stauffer said throughout the trial that Landaeta's potential mental illness — he was previously diagnosed with schizophrenia — played no role in the killing, which occurred after Castro, the mother of his child and previous romantic interest, sent him a bevy of vaguely threatening Snapchat messages.

Various court-appointed doctors called as witnesses also said that Landaeta was not demonstrating current symptoms of psychosis and previous diagnoses had "no genuine causal nexus" to the killing.

During court proceedings Monday, Nov. 13, Landaeta answered nearly three hours of questioning from his own attorneys before appearing unresponsive shortly after cross-examination by prosecution began, in what he claimed was a panic attack episode but prosecutors said was another example of him faking his own mental illness.

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Landaeta's attorney, Robert Cummings, said the messages Castro sent him before the murder, first featuring him of rape and sexual encounters with men and minors before sending messages like "u got a target on ur back now too, haha I already got a green light," "will no one in your life miss u if I'm nonexistent," made Landaeta feel his and his family's life was in imminent danger.

Stauffer said in response that text messages Landaeta received engaged him to the point of murder, rather than scaring him, pointing to Instagram messages he sent a friend hours before the crime which included "im rgl bro she lookin ta get smoked," "she need to get BOLd."

Cummings also said Castro first attacked Landaeta with a knife, provoking his actions to defend himself. The prosecution maintained that no knife was found at the scene and one did not exist.

Laura Engman, Castro's mother, said after the verdict was read out that she was grateful her daughter was receiving justice, but is exhausted by the continued conviction and sentencing process ahead.

"If they would have said anything else I think I would have just lost it right there. I have just been praying for this day," she said. "It should just be over with hearing else should be happening. But we will come back."

The jury will now decide how to decide whether to convict Landaeta on four aggravated charges: great violence and bodily harm, assault with a deadly weapon, the victim being particularly vulnerable, and planning for the crime. The sentencing could occur in December to January, District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe said.

"We have fair and impartial 12 members of our community who had to sit through and listen to horrific and gruesome evidence, and were able to remain fair and impartial and return a correct verdict," Wagstaffe said.

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