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## Iowa court: Woman serving life sentence can appeal

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By Michael J. Crumb, Associated Press Writer

DES MOINES, Iowa — A woman who has served half her life in prison for the 1993 slaying of a retired librarian in Waterloo can challenge her sentence as cruel and unusual punishment, the Iowa Supreme Court ruled Friday.

Ruthann Veal was 14 when she was charged as an adult with first-degree murder in the stabbing death of Catherine Haynes. A Black Hawk County jury found her guilty two years later, and Veal was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Court records show Veal stabbed the 66-year-old Haynes 23 times after running away from a juvenile detention center in Waterloo.

Veal, now 31, filed an application for postconviction relief challenging the constitutionality of her sentence in 2008. The district court and Iowa Court of Appeals rejected her request because it was filed after a three-year-timeline for filing such challenges expired.

The state Supreme Court ruled Friday the time restriction doesn't apply in illegal sentence challenges.

"As a result, Veal's claim does not constitute a postconviction relief action, so her case is not governed by the postconviction statute of limitations," the court wrote in its decision.

The court ordered the case be returned to district court for further action.

Veal's attorney, Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative of Alabama, said he is "delighted" with the court's ruling.

"It permits us to continue the challenge to Ruthann's sentence to life without parole," Stevenson said. "We have contended that a mandatory life sentence imposed when someone is 14 is unconstitutional and violates both state and federal law and we will now get to make that argument in trial court."

Black Hawk County Attorney Tom Ferguson declined comment.

During the trial, prosecutors said Veal went to the retired University of Northern Iowa librarian's home and stabbed her 23 times in the head, neck and chest. They said Veal made several phone calls from Haynes' house before stealing her credit cards and car and going on a shopping spree with friends.

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