



Iowa high court hears challenge to life sentence

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DES MOINES - A woman serving a life prison term for a murder she committed at the age of 14 was subject to what her lawyer said was a cruel and unusual punishment.

The Iowa Supreme Court heard arguments Tuesday in the case of Ruthann Veal, convicted of first-degree murder in the brutal 1993 killing of Catherine Haynes of Waterloo. Haynes, 66, was stabbed 23 times.

Veal, formerly of Mason City, had been on the run from a Waterloo detention facility at the time of the murder. She was tried as an adult and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. She is now 31.

Veal's attorney, Bryan Stevenson, said Iowa lowered the age at which children can be charged as adults before making life without parole a punishment for crimes such as the one Veal was convicted of.

"My own view is that if you had an honest conversation about that in the Legislature it would not be set at 14. No state that has taken this up has ever set the minimum age for life without parole at 14," Stevenson said.

Stevenson, an attorney from Montgomery, Ala., is with the Equal Justice Initiative. The organization represents children in a number of states as young as 13 or 14 who Stevenson said have been condemned to die in prison. The group also has a case pending before the U.S. Supreme Court involving a 13-year-old from Florida sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Even people who feel strongly that punishments should be tough would hesitate on the question of whether a 14-year-old should be placed in an adult prison until they die, Stevenson said.

Stevenson noted that Iowa law does not allow children to drop out of school or operate amusement rides, rooted in an understanding that even though they can do violent and destructive things, they are still not fully formed.

"They're going to change. Their judgment's going to improve. Their impulse control will improve; their sense of responsibility will improve. And while they can do things that are tragic and devastating and need to be punished, we shouldn't conclude that they, like adults, are beyond all hope and redemption," Stevenson said.

He said even in aggravated crimes, juveniles ought to have some chance of rehabilitation.

Assistant Iowa Attorney General Thomas Andrews noted that sentences such as the one handed down to Veal are rare. He also focused on Veal's record before the murder, calling her a "violent recidivist" with 11 different placements for escalating crimes and her attempts to flee from police.

"There was just no dealing with her," Andrews said.

The Iowa Court of Appeals in July turned down Veal's challenge to her life prison sentence. The Iowa Supreme Court agreed to hear the case in October.

The court did not rule on the case Tuesday and is expected to issue a written ruling.

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