

The State 5/21/2014 Columbia mom of missing toddler shows no remorse; board rejects parole bid

By JOHN MONK

Zinah Jennings, a Columbia woman who is serving a 10-year prison sentence in the 2011 disappearance of her toddler son, was turned down for parole Wednesday.

It was her first bid for freedom since her conviction for unlawful conduct toward a child by a Richland County jury in 2012.

Jennings, 25, showed no remorse, nor did she express any interest in where her missing boy, Amir, or his body might be. The child now would be about 4 years old.

Jennings spoke from prison via large-screen video before a three-member panel of the S.C. Board of Pardons and Paroles, which met in Five Points in Columbia.

Speaking for Amir, 5th Circuit assistant prosecutor Dolly Garfield, the lead prosecutor at the 2012 trial, told the panel that Zinah Jennings told "a continuous web of lies" to family members for more than a month about Amir's whereabouts before police finally learned about the situation.

"Amir Jennings is still missing. Amir Jennings is still being searched for. This is an ongoing, continuing criminal investigation against Ms. Jennings," Garfield said. "She has never told anyone where her child is."

"I ask you on behalf of Amir Jennings to deny her parole," Garfield said.

The panel took less than 30 seconds to vote unanimously to deny Jennings' parole bid, citing the seriousness of the crime as a major reason for the denial.

During the hearing, Jennings had an opportunity to volunteer where Amir was and say she was sorry.

Asked by board member Norris Ashford if she had a plan for when she gets out, Jennings said she would like to work with a catering company. "I do love to work."

Ashford then asked, "Anything else you'd like to state at this present time?"

"Yes, I've had a lot of changes since I have been in prison. My mind is changing. My reasoning is different. I've been on mental health, and I'm weaning off my medicine little by little. And I'm trying to do the best I can while I am in prison. I participate in different groups that they have. I participate in AA groups. If I do get out on parole, I'd just like to say thank you very much."

In 2012, Jennings was given a 10-year sentence for unlawful conduct toward a child after a jury found her guilty. The jury heard from 41 prosecution witnesses, some of whom recounted instances where they saw her kick Amir, squeeze him until he cried, leave him unrestrained in a car seat and allow him to

wander unsupervised out of a bank's door. Other testimony indicated that Zinah Jennings had a history of drug abuse and excessive drinking.

The jury took less than three hours to find Zinah Jennings guilty. That trial lasted nearly two weeks and was delayed in part because Jennings gave birth to a second child, a daughter, in the middle of the trial.

Prosecutors believed Amir was dead but were unable to produce his body or any evidence that he was no longer living. Consequently, they had to go for the lesser charge of unlawful conduct toward a child instead of homicide by child abuse.

At the trial, Jocelyn Jennings, Zinah's mother, testified that her daughter had grown up in a well-to-do family, had a good education but during her first year in college began acting oddly. After Amir's birth, she suffered from post-partum depression, Zinah Jennings, a Columbia woman who is serving a 10-year prison sentence in the 2011 disappearance of her toddler son, was turned down for parole Wednesday.

It was her first bid for freedom since her conviction for unlawful conduct toward a child by a Richland County jury in 2012.

Jennings, 25, showed no remorse, nor did she express any interest in where her missing boy, Amir, or his body might be. The child now would be about 4 years old.

Jennings spoke from prison via large-screen video before a three-member panel of the S.C. Board of Pardons and Paroles, which met in Five Points in Columbia.

Speaking for Amir, 5th Circuit assistant prosecutor Dolly Garfield, the lead prosecutor at the 2012 trial, told the panel that Zinah Jennings told "a continuous web of lies" to family members for more than a month about Amir's whereabouts before police finally learned about the situation.

"Amir Jennings is still missing. Amir Jennings is still being searched for. This is an ongoing, continuing criminal investigation against Ms. Jennings," Garfield said. "She has never told anyone where her child is."

"I ask you on behalf of Amir Jennings to deny her parole," Garfield said.

The panel took less than 30 seconds to vote unanimously to deny Jennings' parole bid, citing the seriousness of the crime as a major reason for the denial.

During the hearing, Jennings had an opportunity to volunteer where Amir was said she was sorry.

Asked by board member Norris Ashford if she had a plan for when she gets out, Jennings said she would like to work with a catering company. "I do love to work."

Ashford then asked, "Anything else you'd like to state at this present time?"

"Yes, I've had a lot of changes since I have been in prison. My mind is changing. My reasoning is different. I've been on mental health, and I'm weaning off my medicine little by little. And I'm trying to

do the best I can while I am in prison. I participate in different groups that they have. I participate in AA groups. If I do get out on parole, I'd just like to say thank you very much."

In 2012, Jennings was given a 10-year sentence for unlawful conduct toward a child after a jury found her guilty. The jury heard from 41 prosecution witnesses, some of whom recounted instances where they saw her kick Amir, squeeze him until he cried, leave him unrestrained in a car seat and allow him to wander unsupervised out of a bank's door. Other testimony indicated that Zinah Jennings had a history of drug abuse and excessive drinking.

The jury took less than three hours to find Zinah Jennings guilty. That trial lasted nearly two weeks and was delayed in part because Jennings gave birth to a second child, a daughter, in the middle of the trial.

Prosecutors believed Amir was dead but were unable to produce his body or any evidence that he was no longer living. Consequently, they had to go for the lesser charge of unlawful conduct toward a child instead of homicide by child abuse.

At the trial, Jocelyn Jennings, Zinah's mother, testified that her daughter had grown up in a well-to-do family, had a good education but during her first year in college began acting oddly. After Amir's birth, she suffered from post-partum depression,

Jocelyn Jennings testified.

Wednesday, Jocelyn Jennings appeared at Zinah's side on the live video feed seen by the parole board. She said she and her husband are prepared to support Zinah, should she be paroled.

"We are a Christian family, with values of our work, community service, education. We provided Zinah with a solid foundation," she said. "If we knew then what we know now, we could have prepared for what was to come."

She continued, "We realize that none of us are blameless, but we walk in the Christian way."

Amir Jennings was last seen by his family at Thanksgiving in 2011, when he was 18 months old.

Jennings and her son first were reported missing in early December by her mother. On Dec. 24, Zinah Jennings was found when she was involved in a single-car accident in downtown Columbia, but Amir was not with her.

Zinah Jennings gave law enforcement various stories about the boy being with relatives and friends in South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia. None checked out.

During the search for Amir, law enforcement – including the FBI – spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in investigative work, court time and manhunts but never turned up a trace of Amir. One of Jennings' childhood friends told prosecutors that Jennings had talked about selling Amir or giving him away. Forensic scientists said blood belonging to Amir was found on a blanket inside Jennings' car.

The crime for which Jennings was convicted is in a class of crimes for which a person becomes eligible for parole after service of 25 percent of the sentence. She will be eligible to ask for parole again in a year. Her projected release date from prison is November 2017.

<http://www.thestate.com/2014/05/21/3458762/columbia-mom-of-missing-toddler.html?sp=/99/205/&ihp=1#storylink=cpy>