

Acquitted in killing, he gets max for conspiracy

Del. man gets up to 25 years after odd verdict in '89 murder

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As a teenage skinhead, Thomas Gibison hunted blacks to kill so he could "earn" a spider-web tattoo, but yesterday he said he had turned his life around eight years ago.

"I am not a white supremacist," he said at his sentencing for murder conspiracy and gun violations.

But a prosecutor and a judge didn't buy it — nor did the law-enforcement officers he threatened in 2003.

"He's a man who hates. Cold and calculating and manipulative," said Assistant District Attorney Carlos Vega on behalf of the retired Roger King, who prosecuted the 12-day trial.

Many defendants hate, he added, but Gibison "crossed that line."

On June 3, Gibison, 37, of Newark, Del., was acquitted of the most serious counts — the 1989 killing of a black handyman, Aaron Wood, 34, and ethnic intimidation — because a hold-out juror believed the defendant killed someone, but not Wood.

After a sharp exchange with his defense attorney, Common Pleas Judge M. Teresa Sarmina told Gibison: "You conspired with Craig Peterson to kill someone and used a firearm."

With that, she slammed Gibison with the maximum penalty for conspiracy to murder and weapons violations to be served in consecutive sentences: a total of 12½ to 25 years in state prison. He will be credited for two years spent in jail awaiting trial.

Gibison's attorney, F. Michael Farrell, predicted that his client's conviction for murder conspiracy would be dismissed on appeal.

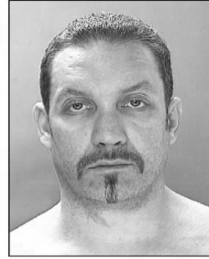
The Wood murder remained unsolved for 19 years until Gibison's ex-girlfriend told authorities that he admitted to the racial killing, and that he repeatedly raped her.

Other witnesses corroborated her sketchy account, including his best friend, Craig Peterson, 38, who testified that he drove the getaway car when Gibison fatally shot a black man in the head in North Philadelphia.

In a 10-minute soliloquy about his troubled life and a 26-page letter to the judge, "All he talks about is himself," said Vega. "Never the words, 'I'm sorry,' or 'I'm sorry for your loss.'"

Gibison wears racist tattoos as "a badge of honor," he added.

Richard Iardella, a retired Wilmington, Del., detective, testified about tape-recorded threats Gibison made in 1999 — to kill him and rape his wife, Di-



Thomas Gibison

ane, an agent with the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, after locating their home. Farrell objected.

Both were on an ATF task force that led to Gibison's 10-year federal sentence for illegal gun sales.

In 2003, Gibison was still smarting, calling Iardella "a

maggot" in a letter to an ex-girlfriend.

Once out of jail, Gibison and his then-wife showed up at Iardella's church in Wilmington — 40 minutes from their Newark home.

After Gibison married the state probation officer, Iardella worried about his daughter, also a probation officer, and the ex-con's access to sensitive information. The retired detective testified that he has taken safety precautions at home and now carries a gun.

Regarding the threats, Gibison said, "I was [a] frustrated person. . . . I was venting."

Facing the Iardellas, he said: "I am no threat to you."

Pleased with Gibison's sentence, Tyrone Wood, 45, said that when his brother died, "I lost my confidante, my brother, my protector, someone I looked up to."

But Wood's uncle, Arnold Wynn, 60, said: Gibison "got away with murder." ★

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