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Two men convicted in slayings during '05 Norfolk homicide spree

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NORFOLK — In circuit courtrooms on the same hallway Tuesday, jurors decided the fate of two men accused of murders during a wave of violence last summer.

In one courtroom, jurors convicted Deion T. Pentecost, 19, of second-degree murder for the June 21 death of 15-year-old Derrick Ellis. Pentecost was one of several men who cruised past Derrick's house on the 700 block of A Ave., according to testimony. Pentecost pointed a shotgun out a car window and fired. A pellet hit Derrick in the head, and he fell near the fence in his front yard.

Down the hall, jurors convicted Kesaun D. Ricks, 22, of second-degree murder for shooting and killing 18-year-old Demont Gwaltney as he sat in a car in the Colley Village Shopping Center, in the 2300 block of Colley Ave., on July 22. Gwaltney was killed in front of two children, ages 12 and 1, whom he was watching in the car.

The killings happened during a surge in violence in the city.

When Derrick was shot, his death marked the 13th slaying in a month. When Gwaltney was killed a month later, his death marked the city's 35th homicide of the year — matching the total number of murders for all of 2004. By the end of the year, the number of homicides in Norfolk had risen to 61 — nearly double the year before.

Derrick's mother, Sherry Ellis-Freeman, and others pleaded with the City Council for help for their neighborhood of Olde Huntersville. The city responded with a crackdown on street-level drug dealers in Huntersville, Park Place and Denby Park that netted more than 200 arrests.

In court earlier this week, Ellis-Freeman cried as she relived her son's death during testimony.

"I stayed with him with my hand over the wound," she said. "I was talking with Derrick until the ambulance arrived."

Pentecost's lawyer, Andrew Protogyrou, tried to show that Derrick had a gun that night, and that Pentecost and others shot in the air to scare him.

Jurors acquitted Pentecost of malicious wounding and weapons charges for a friend of Derrick's who was injured that night.

Jurors have not yet decided Pentecost's sentence. They will hear evidence and deliberate that today.

Two others were charged in the case. Leroy Antonio Evans pleaded guilty to first-degree murder, and was sentenced to serve 69 years and one month in prison. Another man, Kevin Brown, is scheduled to be tried later this month.

During Ricks' trial, members of Gwaltney's family testified that he wanted to be a rapper, or maybe a lawyer. They celebrated his 19th birthday a month after he was killed. The family ate birthday cake and then released balloons at Gwaltney's grave.

Before jurors sentenced him, Ricks said he took responsibility for what happened, but that he had not intended to kill Gwaltney.

Jurors found Ricks guilty of second-degree murder and use of a firearm, and not guilty of attempted robbery and a second weapon charge. The jury recommended a sentence of 38 years. Ricks is scheduled to be formally sentenced in August.