

SUPREME COURT OF FLORIDA

Robert Craft v. State of Florida

Craft v. State · No. SC19-953 · Decided February 25, 2021

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Florida affirmed Robert Craft’s conviction for first-degree murder and sentence of death arising from the killing of his cellmate at Columbia Correctional Institution. The court rejected challenges concerning Craft’s mitigation presentation, the weighing and consideration of mitigating evidence, the trial court’s handling of sentencing procedures, and the absence of a written competency order. The court also determined that Craft’s guilty plea was knowingly, intelligently, and voluntarily entered.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Florida
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per curiam; Charles T. Canady, Chief Justice; R. Fred Lewis; Alan Lawson; Carlos G. Muñoz; John D. Curiel; Jamie R. Grosshans; Jorge Labarga
JURISDICTION	Florida
DECIDED	February 25, 2021
DOCKET	SC19-953
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Direct appeal from a first-degree murder conviction and death sentence entered after Craft pleaded guilty, waived a penalty-phase jury, represented himself with standby counsel, and presented limited mitigation.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed acceptance of a waiver of mitigation for abuse of discretion; the assignment of weight to mitigating circumstances for abuse of discretion; unpreserved competency-order error for fundamental error; mitigation-related sentencing error under the harmless-error standard; and the guilty plea for whether it was knowing, intelligent, and voluntary and supported by competent, substantial evidence.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Florida Supreme Court decision; precedential.
PARTIES	Robert Craft v. State of Florida

TOPICS

sentencing

criminal procedure

appellate procedure

harmless error

standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

capital criminal law

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the trial court abused its discretion in accepting or restricting Craft's waiver and limited presentation of mitigating evidence.
2. Whether the trial court improperly assigned little weight to childhood trauma as a mitigating circumstance.
3. Whether the trial court erred by failing to require the State to place all mitigating evidence in the record, call mitigating witnesses, or appoint special counsel.
4. Whether the trial court failed to consider all believable and uncontroverted mitigation, including Craft's employment history and his saving of a fellow inmate's life.
5. Whether the cumulative effect of mitigation-related errors required relief from the death sentence.
6. Whether the trial court was required to find beyond a reasonable doubt that the aggravating factors were sufficient to justify the death penalty.
7. Whether the absence of a written competency order required remand for entry of a nunc pro tunc order.
8. Whether Craft's guilty plea was knowingly, intelligently, and voluntarily entered and supported by a sufficient factual basis.

HOLDINGS

1. A competent capital defendant has the right to control the presentation of mitigation, and Craft did not waive mitigation because he actually presented family testimony and made his own statement. The trial court therefore did not abuse its discretion in accepting his limited mitigation presentation.
2. The sentencing court must consider believable and uncontroverted mitigating evidence contained anywhere in the record, but the trial court's failure to consider Craft's prior employment history and his saving of a fellow inmate's life was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt.
3. The trial court did not abuse its discretion by assigning little weight to the childhood-trauma mitigator.
4. The trial court did not abuse its discretion by failing to require additional mitigation from the State, call additional mitigating witnesses, or appoint special counsel.
5. The trial court was not required to find beyond a reasonable doubt that the aggravating factors, collectively, were sufficient to justify the death penalty. Only the existence of at least one statutory aggravating circumstance must be found beyond a reasonable doubt.
6. The trial court's failure to enter a written competency order did not constitute fundamental error and did not require remand for a nunc pro tunc order.

7. Craft's guilty plea was knowing, intelligent, and voluntary, and the factual basis supported his first-degree murder conviction.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“in the final analysis, all competent defendants have a right to control their own destinies” (13)

“consider all mitigating evidence” (18)

“not subject to the beyond a reasonable doubt standard of proof.” (22)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

On May 16, 2018, while incarcerated at Columbia Correctional Institution, Craft beat and strangled his cellmate, Darren W. Shira, after planning the killing for several days. Craft repeatedly confessed, including in recorded statements and letters, and pleaded guilty to premeditated first-degree murder. During the penalty phase, the State presented evidence of the killing and Craft's prior violent felonies, while Craft presented testimony from four family members and made a statement but otherwise sought to limit mitigation.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Craft was indicted for premeditated first-degree murder in the Circuit Court for Columbia County. After competency evaluations, the trial court permitted him to waive counsel and represent himself; he pleaded guilty and waived a penalty-phase jury. Following a penalty-phase proceeding, the trial court imposed a death sentence. Craft appealed directly to the Supreme Court of Florida, which affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- *Faretta v. California*, 422 U.S. 806 (1975)
- *Lynch v. State*, 841 So. 2d 362, 376-77 (Fla. 2003)
- *Spencer v. State*, 615 So. 2d 688 (Fla. 1993)
- *Lawrence v. State*, 45 Fla. L. Weekly S277, S279, S282 n.8 (Fla. Oct. 29, 2020)
- *Robertson v. State*, 187 So. 3d 1207, 1212, 1214 (Fla. 2016)
- *Boyd v. State*, 910 So. 2d 167, 188 (Fla. 2005)
- *Robinson v. State*, 684 So. 2d 175, 177 (Fla. 1996)
- *Bevel v. State*, 983 So. 2d 505, 521 (Fla. 2008)
- *Gill v. State*, 14 So. 3d 946, 950 n.4, 955, 964 (Fla. 2009)
- *Blackwood v. State*, 777 So. 2d 399, 412-13 (Fla. 2000)
- *Marquardt v. State*, 156 So. 3d 464, 491 (Fla. 2015)
- *Muhammad v. State*, 782 So. 2d 343, 363-64 & n.11 (Fla. 2001)

- Ault v. State, 53 So. 3d 175, 187, 194-95 (Fla. 2010)
- Bush v. State, 295 So. 3d 179, 215 (Fla. 2020)
- Rogers v. State, 285 So. 3d 872, 886, 890 (Fla. 2019)
- Newberry v. State, 288 So. 3d 1040, 1047 (Fla. 2019)
- McKinney v. Arizona, 140 S. Ct. 702, 707-08 (2020)
- State v. Poole, 297 So. 3d 487, 505, 507 (Fla. 2020)
- Hurst v. Florida, 577 U.S. 92 (2016)
- Ring v. Arizona, 536 U.S. 584 (2002)
- Santiago-Gonzalez v. State, 301 So. 3d 157, 175 & n.5 (Fla. 2020)
- Fennie v. State, 855 So. 2d 597, 608-09 (Fla. 2003)
- Hayward v. State, 24 So. 3d 17, 42 (Fla. 2009)
- Reed v. State, 837 So. 2d 366, 370 (Fla. 2002)
- Agan v. State, 445 So. 2d 326, 328-29 (Fla. 1983)
- Doty v. State, 170 So. 3d 731, 738-39 (Fla. 2015)
- Winkles v. State, 894 So. 2d 842, 847 (Fla. 2005)