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VOCAL Christmas tree contested

By Matt Elofson



Pat Jones recently hung a picture of her mother on a Christmas tree.

But Jones said the picture of Ella Foy Riley wasn't just hung on any tree, but a tree placed in the lobby of the Houston County Courthouse to remember those fallen to violent crimes across the Wiregrass.

Jones serves as the founder and president of the Southeast Alabama chapter of Victims of Crime and Leniency (VOCAL). Riley was murdered at her home in Henry County.

Dothan attorney Billy Joe Sheffield II filed requests this week to have all of his 10 to 15 clients' cases scheduled for trial next week delayed because of the placement of the Christmas tree.

Four Houston County Circuit Court judges are scheduled to hold criminal jury trials starting Monday.

"I just want to ensure my clients have a fair trial without any bias," Sheffield said. "I'm not opposed to the Christmas tree, and I'm not opposed to the VOCAL sign being there. But what I'm opposed to is the photographs being right next to the jury room."

According to the court filing , Sheffield asked for his client's cases to be delayed until after the holidays or the VOCAL display was removed he said allowing the defendants to receive a fair and impartial trial. In the court filing, Sheffield called the placement of the tree in the lobby next to the room where jurors go during their selection process "highly" prejudicial and inflammatory.

Jones said she set up the tree in the lobby of the first floor of the courthouse near the elevators on Tuesday.

"We've got some angels and pictures on the tree. It's people that have been murdered. It's just our way of honoring them," Jones said. "When you think of a courthouse you think of justice. These defendants can walk around and breathe. We can only visit our loved one's graves."

But Jones also said lawyers need to get their facts straight before they submit an official request to the courts.

According to the court filing , Sheffield claimed the tree was erected by an organization started by the Houston/Henry County District Attorney's Office. Jones said she started the local VOCAL chapter in May 1995 in honor of her mother who was murdered during the month of May five years earlier.

Jones said she did not think the tree would influence any jurors, and said there are no murder cases set for trial next week.

"I just think he just wants the month of December off or he ain't ready for his cases," Jones said. "We're willing to cover the tree up or move it if someone of authority tells us we have to because we're not there to cause trouble. We try to do what we can to put a little joy in Christmas for these families."

Sheffield said all but a couple of the requests made to delay trial have been ruled and denied. He said the cases before Judge Butch Binford had not been ruled on yet. One of his clients, Kenneth Floyd Jr., who faces a cocaine trafficking charge, was set for fourth in line for trial in front of Circuit Court Judge Michael Conaway.

Jones said VOCAL also had permission from the Houston County Commission to put the Christmas tree in the courthouse.

Houston County Commission Chairman Mark Culver said it was approved, but not voted on by the commission.

"We encourage our departments to put up Christmas decorations, and what goes on the tree and where it's placed I'm not involved in," Culver said. "Whether or not it has any influence on court cases, that's not something I can determine."