

July 13, 2013

Crowds react to George Zimmerman not-guilty verdict

*Rick Neale
Florida Today*

Demonstrators exclaimed disbelief, one by one, as they learned on their phones Saturday night that George Zimmerman was found not guilty of murdering Trayvon Martin.

At 9:02 p.m. "Justice for Trayvon!" chants erupted from fist-waving people at the fountain across from the courthouse.

"The system has failed!" irate demonstrators started chanting.

The waiting game under way for the hundreds of protesters anticipating a verdict outside the Seminole County Criminal Justice Center was finally over.

Nina Mays of Tulsa, Okla., was outraged by the verdict.

"This is going to impact a lot of people in a lot of different places," Mays said minutes after the announcement, standing a few yards from chanting protesters.

"How is the law different for one and not for the other? Trayvon was standing his ground when Zimmerman came and messed with him, a young man coming from the store," she said.

"When do you gun down people for no reason? And why don't you get locked up for it when you do it?" she demanded, voice rising.

The large majority of the more than 350 sign-waving demonstrators wanted George Zimmerman convicted of murder.

Ramon Silvia, 27, had been waiting for the verdict.

"I think they are wrong," he said.

William Memola, an Orlando flooring contractor, displayed signs supporting Zimmerman on Friday and Saturday.

"It was the correct verdict. There are no winners. It's just, the law was written, and they followed the law. They got this one right," Memola said, standing on a sidewalk near the courthouse.

"But there are no winners. It's terrible for the Martin family and everybody involved. There's a young boy who lost his life," he said.

"It's just tragic. You can't help the verdict. It is what it is. They wrote the law -- they followed the law," he said.

Howie Felterbush stood on the outskirts of the demonstration crowd, watching.

"Justice was rendered," he said. "That's why we have trials instead of (verdicts based on) public opinion."

Felterbush was in Orlando earlier in the day and came to the courthouse to offer an opposing view. "That wasn't to be had," he said. "There was 95 percent Trayvon supporters."

The Melbourne resident believes the jury made the right decision, but he didn't say it very loudly. The 49-year old declined to be interviewed on video, saying he was uncomfortable because of the "state of things."

A woman standing next to him, who also supported George Zimmerman, declined an interview entirely. "I want to make it back to the car," she said.

Earlier Diane Whitaker, a disabled grandmother from DeLand, walked across the grassy plaza showing a sign "Murder Is A Crime: Guilty" while people milled about Saturday evening.

"While we're waiting, we're praying too -- for justice to be done. Because God said, 'Vengeance is mine,'" Whitaker said.

"We're waiting for a verdict of second-degree murder. Second-degree murder. Right is right, and wrong is wrong. He broke the law," she said of Zimmerman.

But James Dugan, a newly graduated Sanford high school student, believes otherwise. His hand-held sign read "Justice For George."

"I think he was covered by the 'Stand Your Ground' law. I think the defense has done their job -- and the prosecution has not," Dugan said.

"More importantly, not proven beyond a reasonable doubt that he's guilty of any ill will or malice when he shot Trayvon Martin," he said.

The crowds began gathering outside the courthouse early Saturday morning as jurors continued deliberations.

Jurors deliberated into Saturday evening when they asked the judge to clarify the instructions on the manslaughter charge.

Outside supporters on both sides of the case shouted slogans, waved banners and even clashed at several points.

As dark clouds thickened overhead midafternoon and a cooling breeze swept across the courthouse grounds there were a fresh series of chants from Trayvon Martin supporters.

About 60 demonstrators began yelling in unison and waving signs, clustering around a large black-and-red banner reading "End Racial Oppression: Justice 4 Trayvon." The "o" in Trayvon was a silhouette of a hooded sweatshirt.

"Convict George Zimmerman!" the demonstrators repeatedly chanted.

"The people united will never be defeated!"

"When I say George, you say guilty! George! Guilty! George! Guilty!"

Fewer than 10 demonstrators carried signs supporting Zimmerman's cause.

Sisters Melissa and Amy Waz of Tampa traveled to Sanford to rally in support of Zimmerman. Amy carried the sign "Self Defense Is A Basic Human Right," while Melissa wore a black "I Believe You Zimmerman" T-shirt and carried the sign "It Doesn't Matter What This Sign Says: You'll Call It Racism Anyway!"

"We don't think this case should have ever been brought to trial. And if race hadn't been brought into it, we don't think it would have been," Waz said. "We think he deserves to go home to his family and live as much of a normal life as he can."

Earlier in the day as a reporter interviewed Casey David Kole Sr., an Orlando retiree and Zimmerman supporter, a man nearby interrupted the interview.

"I believe in George and what he stands for," Kole said. "The fact that he was the neighborhood watch (commander) on a voluntary basis -- it proves to me that he's an upright citizen."

That statement drew a rebuke from a nearby shirtless, young man who said he legally changed his name to Malcolm X. He held a sign that said "How Long Will They Keep Cannibalizing The Black Male."

"That's all it takes -- the neighborhood watch -- to be an upright citizen? If it was that simple," Malcolm X exclaimed, interrupting the interview.