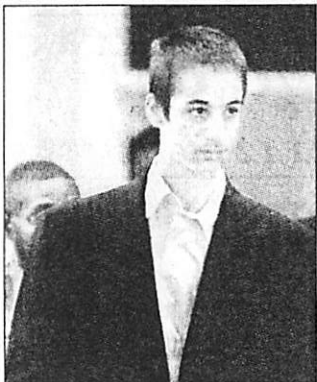


Teen who shot grandparents blames Zoloft 'voice'



Jim Stratakos/Associated Press

Christopher Pittman is being prosecuted as an adult. He faces 30 years to life in prison if convicted at his trial.

By Jeffrey Collins
Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Joe Pittman read his son's confession during a Food and Drug Administration hearing in Washington.

"I took everything out on my grandparents, who I loved so very much," wrote Christopher Pittman. "When I was lying in my bed that night, I couldn't sleep because my voice in my head kept echoing through my mind, telling me to kill them."

Authorities say three years ago, Christopher, then 12, shot his grandparents as they slept in their rural home because they had scolded him for fighting on the school bus.

Pittman thinks his son killed because his sense of right and wrong was clouded by the anti-depressant Zoloft. The boy, who had threatened suicide, was put on the drug three weeks before the slayings, and his dose was doubled just two days earlier.

But prosecutors and police say Christopher's actions during and after the November 2001 slayings show he clearly knew what he was doing was wrong.

The boy shot 66-year-old Joe Frank Pittman, then fired at 62-year-old Joy Pittman.

Christopher then set the house on fire and drove off in the family car. He told hunters he was kidnapped by a man who killed his grandparents, set the

fire, drove him into the woods and ran away.

Christopher told defense experts he felt abandoned by his mother and his relationship with his father was rocky. No one answered phone calls to Pittman's home.

A month before the slayings, Christopher was hospitalized in Florida, where his father lives, after he threatened to kill himself. The boy was prescribed the anti-depressant Paxil, but another doctor soon put him on Zoloft instead.

Pittman decided to send the boy to live with his grandparents in South Carolina.

Christopher, who turns 16 in April, is being prosecuted as an

adult and faces 30 years to life in prison if convicted at his trial, set to start next month. His lawyers argue that his case should be moved to Family Court, where if convicted, he could only be kept in custody until he turns 21.

Karen Menzies, one of Christopher's lawyers and an attorney specializing in lawsuits against anti-depressant makers, said medical research is available to support the Zoloft defense.

In the three years the teen has spent in jail awaiting trial, the FDA has become increasingly wary of doctors prescribing Zoloft and other antidepressants for children.

In October, the agency ordered the drugs to carry "black

box" warnings about increasing the risk of suicidal behavior in children.

Pfizer Inc., the maker of Zoloft, has aided the prosecution, according to Solicitor John Justice.

The company has vigorously fought cases claiming antidepressants cause violent or suicidal behavior.

National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers spokesman Jack King said the "Zoloft-made-me-do-it" defense likely means that Christopher's case will come down to defense vs. prosecution experts.

"It's going to be a battle of whose experts the jury believes," King said.