

EX-MAYOR CONVICTED OF PLOT TO KILL HUSBAND

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JULY 1, 2000 | MIAMI --

After two weeks of testimony in which the personal lives of witnesses and the accused were aired in salacious detail, the trial of former Hialeah Gardens Mayor Gilda Oliveros came to an end Friday amid the sobs of her daughters and family members.

Even the ex-husband she wanted to kill seemed crestfallen by her conviction, his head hung low.

After more than five hours of deliberation, the jury declared Oliveros, 50, guilty of six charges that ranged from voter fraud to asking two of her former employees to murder her then-husband so she could cash in on a \$45,000 life insurance policy. Miami-Dade Circuit Court Judge Peter Lopez declared a mistrial on one insurance fraud count because the jury was not properly instructed.

Oliveros' two daughters broke into sobs and moans. Oliveros, dubbed the "miniskirt mayor," did not cry as she hugged her daughters across a partition, took off her necklace and placed it around one of their necks.

Once outside the courtroom, one of the two young women collapsed on the floor. One of Oliveros' supporters screamed: "What a disgrace this country's justice is."

For the prosecutors from the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office Public Corruption Unit, the conviction was a relief. Their witnesses had been blasted for having axes to grind against Oliveros and for inconsistencies in their testimony. Angel Ramos, Oliveros' ex-husband and the intended murder victim, testified in her favor, further complicating their case.

"It was a hard case to try," said lead prosecutor Joe Centorino. "This jury took their time and they arrived at the correct verdict."

Oliveros' defense attorneys were stunned by the jury's decision. In their closing arguments they pointed at lawsuits the prosecution's witnesses had filed against Oliveros and Ramos' unwavering support of Oliveros.

"Just the very thought of the [intended] murder victim siding with the defense. Where have you seen such a thing?" defense attorney Ed Shohat told the jury during his closing argument. "The verdicts were outrageous. We're shocked and surprised."

The case against Oliveros, a four-term mayor, started in 1997 as state investigators looked into allegations of voter fraud in that year's campaign, which she won with 80 percent of the vote.

Investigators uncovered a plot in which Oliveros allegedly was pressuring two long-time city employees to murder Ramos, whom she was about to divorce.

She had just taken out a life insurance policy in his name. During the trial, writing experts testified she forged Ramos' signature.

Robert Godwin, Oliveros' assistant and one of two men she asked to murder Ramos, became the star witness for the prosecution.

But Shohat and his partner Michael Pizzi brought up a previous discrimination lawsuit in which Godwin claimed Oliveros constantly mocked his bisexuality.

Also, they hinted at a relationship between Godwin and Rafael Reyes, the other employee she asked to join in the plot. Shohat asked Godwin where Reyes slept when he went to his house and about their outings to gay bars in Surfside.

Oliveros' personal life was also laid bare as Centorino accused her of asking Godwin to distract Ramos so she could meet her alleged lover, Julio Martinez, also a city employee.

To defend herself against the accusations that she discriminated against Godwin because of his sexual preferences, Oliveros went so far as to declare openly that one of her daughters, Jesebelle, was lesbian.

"We did not pick our witnesses," Miami-Dade State Attorney Kathy Fernandez Rundle said. "This started out as a voter fraud case and we followed the witnesses and we followed the evidence. From our perspective justice was served."

Oliveros faces six to 10 years in prison.

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