

Column

## Raw deal gets law students' attention

By Andrew Skerritt, Times Columnist

Published March 3, 2008

William Thornton IV was just 17 when he was sentenced to 30 years.



In the past two years, nothing has flooded my e-mail basket or lit up my phone line more than the strange case of William Thornton IV.

In late 2005, Circuit Court Judge Ric Howard sentenced then-17-year-old Thornton to 30 years in prison for a car accident that killed two people in Citrus County. Thornton had no prior criminal record but was driving without a license.

The details led many of you to say the same thing: The punishment is out of whack with the crime - if it even was a crime.

Now a group of students from a small Jacksonville law school are stepping in to fight for Thornton.

Last fall, a student heard about Thornton's plight and approached Cynthia Irving, director of the Florida Coastal Law School's Juvenile Law Clinic. Irving contacted Citrus attorney Robert Christiansen, who had handled one of Thornton's early appeals. Christiansen was happy to send them his files - transcripts 4 inches thick.

Although the law students have never met Thornton, they've made his case their cause. They spent the past six weeks drafting an appeal arguing that Thornton deserves a new hearing because he had lousy counsel.

Inmates file these kinds of appeals all the time, but this case resonated with the students.

"I was shocked that someone so young could get such a harsh sentence for a tragic accident," said third-year law student Samantha Shealy of Ocala.

Thornton was driving a car in late December 2004 when he skidded into an intersection and collided with another vehicle, killing Brandon Mushlit and Sara Jo Williams.

Neither wore a seat belt; both were ejected.

Thornton shouldn't have been driving that night, but there were some mitigating factors, including a stop sign that was difficult to see at a dangerous intersection.

He wasn't speeding. He wasn't impaired, but the other driver was.

None of this mattered. Thornton couldn't afford a lawyer, so his case was handed to an assistant public defender, Eric Evilsizer. He did no reconstruction of the accident scene and persuaded his client to plead no contest to two counts of vehicular homicide without any guarantees on sentencing.

Judge Howard gave the kid the max. Thornton could remain in prison until 2034.

The sentence seems all the more harsh because a year earlier Howard had sentenced Thornton's father, Michael, to 30 years in prison for dealing in stolen property.

Howard has rejected requests to soften his sentence. When he ruled against Thornton's attempt to withdraw his guilty plea, Howard said the law doesn't allow a do-over.

A group of young, idealistic law students might have something to say about that.