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'Cowboy' Mike Braae found guilty in rape, murder

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Elisa Jones, who was 11 when she stood nearby as her mother's strangled body was found under a bed in their apartment, cried tears of relief Thursday as she watched a jury convict her mother's killer.

"Evil," Elisa Jones said of "Cowboy" Mike Braae, who faces 42 to 56 years in prison for Lori Jones' rape and murder. "That's the only word to describe him, really. Evil."

Braae, 48, a self-described country singer who says women flocked to him when he played his guitar in South Sound bars, might have killed as many as three other women in the Northwest, Lacey detective Bev Reinhold said.

As Braae faces spending the rest of his life in prison, Jones is bound for college in California.

Jones, an 18-year-old Tumwater High School senior, will enroll in the honors program at California State University, Northridge, in the fall.

She lives with her best friend's mother, Shandi Druet, who was Jones' legal guardian when she was a minor.

Jones said that since the slaying, she has enjoyed a normal high school life, going to prom, playing varsity basketball and tennis, and keeping a high grade-point average.

"She really is truly an incredible kid," Druet, who was by Jones' side in court, said Thursday. "It's amazing that she's done as well as she did."

Jones said she wants to study criminology in college — partly because of what happened to her mother and partly because her mother sparked her interest in the subject.

Jones said that when Braae is sentenced, she wants to address the court to let him know what he took from her. Jones said her sister Mindy, who is in the Navy, helped her through the tough times.

Jones and Druet credited the prosecution team, Chief Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Jon Tunheim and Special Trials Division Chief Christy Peters, with Braae's conviction. Jones also thanked Reinhold for her commitment to solving the case. Jones said she remembers Reinhold's compassion when she responded at the crime scene at Summer Ridge Apartments on July 8, 2001.

"She's been with me since Day One," Jones said of Reinhold.

During closing arguments Wednesday, Tunheim listed the evidence against Braae, who was seen by a bartender leaving Bailey's Motor Inn with Lori Jones on July 6, 2001. It was the last time Jones, 44, was seen alive.

When Elisa Jones returned from a camping trip two days later, an apartment manager who had to let her in the building found Lori Jones' body under her bed. Lacey detectives found a fingerprint on damaged window blinds that matched Braae's.

DNA evidence from Lori Jones' sexual assault matched Braae's DNA profile. A male's pubic hair found on Jones' body also implicated Braae, according to trial testimony.

On the witness stand, Braae said he had sex with Lori Jones on July 6, 2001, but that an unknown man then picked her up in a dark-colored sport utility vehicle. He also said he was involved in a sexual relationship with Lori Jones starting in April 2001.

"I just thought it was ridiculous because I knew everything he was saying wasn't true at all," Elisa Jones said.

Tunheim said the jury heard Braae brag about his guitar playing, his attractiveness to the opposite sex, his ability to elude police and his lack of caring for his victim.

"The only person that matters to him in his mind is him," Tunheim said. "He has no conscience and no empathy."

He called Braae "the most dangerous person I've every prosecuted in my career."

Tunheim said it's satisfying to get a conviction of someone who is suspected in other homicides and felonies. "He is smart; there's no question about it. And he's a little lucky, too," that he has avoided prosecution for the other crimes, Tunheim said.

Braae was captured in Idaho on July 20, 2001, after leading police on a chase that ended when he jumped off of a 40-foot bridge into the Snake River. He is serving an Idaho prison

sentence for crimes related to the chase. His sentencing date for Lori Jones' rape and murder has not been set.

"I hope that Lori can rest in peace," Druet said. "I know that she watches over everything that Elisa does."