

No. 18-553

In The

Supreme Court of the United States

OCTOBER TERM 2018



JULIET YACKEL on behalf of
Rodney Scott Berget,

Petitioner

v.

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT
OF CORRECTIONS and DENNY
KAEMINGK, SECRETARY, SOUTH
DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF
CORRECTIONS,

Respondent



RESPONSE TO WRIT OF CERTIORARI AND APPLICATION FOR STAY OF EXECUTION



MARTY J. JACKLEY, South Dakota Attorney General
PAUL S. SWEDLUND, Assistant Attorney General
Counsel of Record
OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA
1302 East Highway 14, Suite 1
Pierre, SD 57501-8501
Telephone: 605-773-3215
Facsimile: 605-773-4106
paul.swedlund@state.sd.us

*Attorneys for Respondent
State of South Dakota*

**CAPITAL CASE – EXECUTION SET OCTOBER 29, 2018,
AT 1:30 P.M.**

**In The
Supreme Court of the United States**

NO. 18-553

JULIET YACKEL on behalf of Rodney
Berget,

Petitioner,
v.

**SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT
OF CORRECTIONS and DENNY
KAEMINGK, SECRETARY, SOUTH
DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF
CORRECTIONS,**

Defendants.

**RESPONSE TO PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI AND
APPLICATION FOR STAY OF EXECUTION**

Defendants South Dakota Department of Corrections and Denny Kaemingk, Secretary, through their counsel, Marty J. Jackley, Attorney General, and Paul S. Swedlund, Assistant Attorney General, hereby file this response in opposition to petitioner's motion for a writ of prohibition or other relief. Berget's competency and intellectual capacity were fully litigated in an *Atkins* trial in January of this year. The court found Berget competent and not intellectually disabled. SOUTH

DAKOTA SUPREME COURT ORDER DENYING PETITION, copy attached. The court entered findings of fact and conclusions of law detailing the grounds for its decision. For the reasons noted by the South Dakota Supreme Court, this court should find that Yackel lacks standing to file pleadings on his behalf and deny her petition because she cannot demonstrate Berget's incompetency or incapacity.

The standard applied to Berget's competence is found in *Rees v. Peyton*, 384 U.S. 312, 86 S.Ct. 1505 (1966). *Rees* defined a competent person as someone who "has capacity to appreciate his position and make a rational choice with respect to continuing or abandoning further litigation." *Rees*, 384 U.S. at 314, 86 S.Ct. at 1506. Conversely, an incompetent person is someone who "is suffering from a mental disease, disorder or defect which may substantially affect his capacity in the premises." *Rees*, 384 U.S. at 314, 86 S.Ct. at 1506.

Before determining the *Rees* standard's application to Berget, it is first important to point out that "[e]vincing a decision to waive the presentation of mitigating evidence, (and thereby invite a death sentence), does not by itself call the defendant's competency into question." *Cowans v. Bagley*, 624 F.Supp.2d 709, 753 (S.D. Ohio 2008). Indeed, in *Whitmore v. Arkansas*, 495 U.S. 149, 165, 100 S.Ct. 1717 (1990), this Court declined to find that "a hearing on mental competency is required by the United States Constitution whenever a capital defendant desires to terminate further proceedings." Even when a capital crime defendant waives constitutional rights designed to protect him from a death sentence, "a competency determination is necessary only when a court has reason to doubt the defendant's

competence.” *Godinez v. Moran*, 509 U.S. 389, 402, 113 S.Ct. 2680, 2688, n. 13 (1993).

After *Rees*, this Court again addressed the question of a death row inmate’s competency to waive further appeals in *Gilmore v. Utah*, 429 U.S. 1012, 97 S.Ct. 436 (1976). Gilmore was seen by psychiatrists who determined (1) that “Gilmore fully understood his right to appeal and the consequences of a decision not to appeal,” (2) that “Gilmore’s decision to waive appeal was the ‘product of an organized thought process,’” and (3) that Gilmore “presently has the mental capacity and the emotional stability to make the necessary decision concerning his sentence and to understand the consequences.” *Gilmore*, 429 U.S. at 1015, 97 S.Ct. at 438, n. 4, n. 5. While not addressing these findings specifically to the *Rees* decision or standard, this Court determined that these findings were sufficient to establish Gilmore’s competency, and, therefore, his family’s lack of standing to prosecute the appeals Gilmore wished to abandon.

However, the *Godinez* court did revisit the *Rees* standard to resolve the question of “whether the competency standard for pleading guilty or waiving the right to counsel [in a death penalty case] is higher than the competency standard for standing trial.” *Godinez*, 509 U.S. at 391, 113 S.Ct. at 2682. After comparing the *Rees* standard to standards for determining competency to stand trial propounded in other cases, *Godinez* “reject[ed] the notion that competence to plead guilty or to waive the right to counsel must be measured by a standard that is higher than (or even different from) the [competency to stand trial] standard.”

Godinez, 509 U.S. at 398, 113 S.Ct. at 2686. The foregoing authorities inform us that Berget's decision to waive further appeals, standing alone, does not call his competency or capacity into question.

Further, the evidence before the court at Berget's *Atkins* trial conclusively established that Berget is not intellectually disabled or incompetent. SOUTH DAKOTA SUPREME COURT ORDER DENYING PETITION, copy attached. Also, nothing in Berget's various conversations with the court concerning his wishes or his courtroom demeanor gave Judge Hoffman "reason to doubt [Berget's] competence." *Godinez*, 509 U.S. at 402, 113 S.Ct. at 2688, n. 13.

If anything, Berget's conversations with the court evidenced a lucid understanding of the reason for his execution and the consequences of his decision to waive further appeals. Berget understood that he was sentenced to the death for the murder of Ron Johnson, acknowledging that his penalty fit his crime:

All I have to say is that I'm guilty of taking Ronald Johnson's life. I know what I was doing on the day when I went over to the shops, and I continued to do it. I destroyed a family. I took away a father, a husband, a grandpa. They'll never see their father again or husband. He will never walk through that door again. I made sure of that by my actions. I'm not going to beg the Court or ask the Court to spare my life. I believe I deserve the death penalty for what I've done. That's all I have to say.

BERGET SENTENCING IV at 37/5-14. As reflected in Judge Hoffman's findings of fact and conclusions of law, Berget understood the ramifications of his waiver.

Berget has also expressed frustration with Yackel's efforts to circumvent his wishes. When she came to visit him at the penitentiary earlier this month, he refused to meet or visit with her.

These facts, and others adduced at the *Atkins* trial demonstrate that no further examination of Berget's competency or capacity is required because neither Berget's mental history nor his interactions with the court suggested "reason to doubt" his competency. *Godinez*, 509 U.S. at 402, 113 S.Ct. at 2688, n. 13.

Berget's incompetency is the "prerequisite for 'next friend' standing." *Whitmore*, 495 U.S. at 165, 110 S.Ct. at 1728. In *Whitmore*, a fellow death row inmate sought to prosecute Ronald Gene Simmons' direct appeal. This Court determined that Whitmore lacked standing because Simmons had previously been adjudicated competent. *Whitmore*, 495 U.S. at 165, 110 S.Ct. at 1728.

Whitmore is consistent with this Court's earlier *Gilmore* decision, which ruled that Gilmore's mother would have standing to pursue Gilmore's appeals on his behalf only if he were incompetent and "unable to seek relief in his own behalf." *Gilmore*, 429 U.S. at 1015 n. 4, 97 S.Ct. at 438. Like Gilmore, Berget was found competent after examination by Dr. Bean and numerous reviews by other qualified mental health professionals. *Gilmore*, 429 U.S. at 1014, 1017, 97 S.Ct. 438, 439. Like Gilmore, Berget's access to this court is unimpeded in that he is currently represented by Jeff Larson in the criminal case and Eric Schulte in the *habeas corpus* case. *Gilmore*, 429 U.S. at 1014, 97 S.Ct. 437. Because Berget is competent and represented, Yackel has no standing to file anything on his behalf.

CONCLUSION

As observed in *Chapman v. Commonwealth*, 265 S.W.3d 156, 175-76, (Ky. 2008), "[a]dhering to a defendant's choice to seek the death penalty honors the last

vestiges of personal dignity available to such a defendant.” Berget wants to partially redeem himself in the public eye and in the minds of his family by accepting his punishment. It is not Juliet Yackel’s place to thwart Berget’s wishes. Accordingly, Yackel’s last-minute petition for a writ of prohibition and stay of execution should be denied in full.

Dated this 29th day of October 2018.

**MARTY J. JACKLEY
ATTORNEY GENERAL**

Paul_S._Swedlund _____
Paul S. Swedlund
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
1302 East Highway 14, Suite 1
Pierre, South Dakota 57501-8501
Telephone: 605-773-3215
paul.swedlund@state.sd.us

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

The undersigned hereby certifies that on this 29th day of October 2018 a true and correct copy of the foregoing response to petition for writ of certiorari and stay of execution was served on Lisa Agrimonti at lagrimonti@fredlaw.com.

Paul_S._Swedlund _____
Paul S. Swedlund
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL