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Joseph Robert Gustafson

'Beat Down Posse' leader convicted of racketeering and more

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A Hennepin County jury convicted ex-Hell's Angel and former bail bondsman Joseph "Big Joe" Gustafson Sr. of racketeering and other felonies Friday, in an explosive hearing in which a family member screamed an expletive at the jury and Gustafson swore at the judge.

The verdict was announced Friday afternoon after a two-week trial and six hours of deliberation. As a clerk read the verdicts on multiple counts, Gustafson shook his head and turned to his family, where the men struggled to comfort gasping and sobbing women. A young woman stood up and screamed at the jury, calling them, in part, "delusional." Judge Kerry Meyer ordered the woman from the courtroom.

Gustafson, 56, was indicted last summer on six felony counts, including attempted murder and arson, as the alleged leader of the "Beat Down Posse," a brutal north Minneapolis gang that robbed, intimidated and assaulted drug dealers and others. Prosecutors alleged that he was the "CEO" of the gang, issuing orders while running the gang under the front of his business, Gustafson Bail Bonds. His son, Joseph Duane "Little Joe" Gustafson Jr., 37, is scheduled to stand trial on charges of racketeering and similar crimes in March.

Gustafson's attorney, Barry Voss, said during trial that the witnesses who testified against his client, mostly former members of the gang, were only doing so in hopes of getting breaks in criminal cases of their own. Voss declined to comment after the verdicts Friday.

Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman called the verdicts a "huge win."

"We know that the Gustafson gang has been terrorizing north Minneapolis for at least 20 years," he said. "The primo domo of that gang has been brought to justice. We look forward to bringing the same to junior when he goes to trial in March."

Freeman said he plans to ask for at least 20 years in prison for Gustafson.

"This guy has not been in the church choir," he said.

He wouldn't say whether the office planned to offer plea deals to the former gang members who testified against Gustafson.

The jury convicted Gustafson of racketeering, a felony, as well as kidnapping, second-degree assault, first-degree arson and accessory after the fact. He was cleared of attempted first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder. He faces up to 20 years in prison for the racketeering conviction and up to 40 years for kidnapping.

Gustafson, who wore jeans and a sweat shirt throughout trial with his long gray hair in a braid down his back, was incredulous at the conviction.

"How can they convict me?" he asked Meyer, adding that he would take a lie detector test.

Meyer explained that the jury felt differently based on the evidence they heard. Gustafson shook his head.

He remains held without bail in the Hennepin County Jail pending sentencing March 1. His family declined to comment.