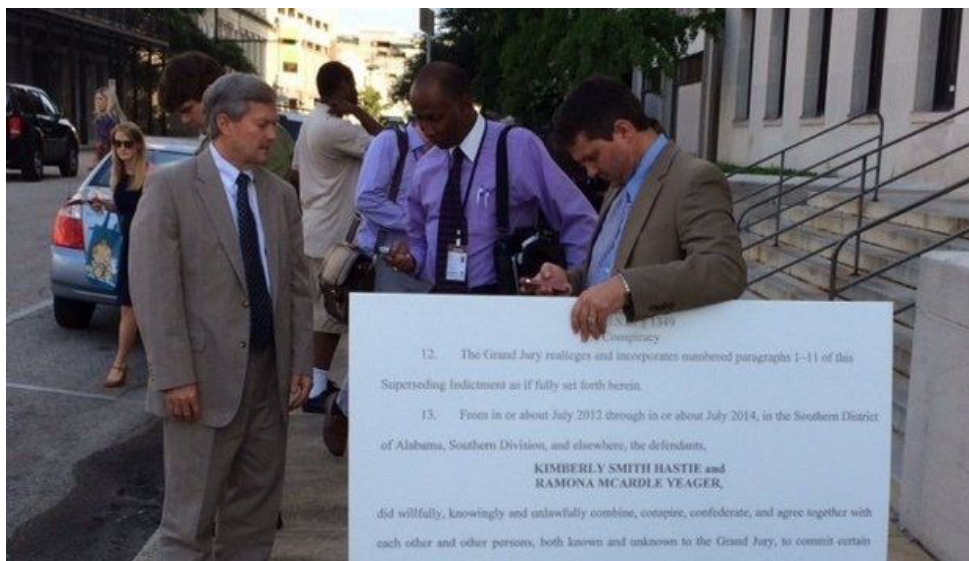


'Burn the courthouse down' close helps win acquittal; attorney Knizley has used it before



Defense lawyer Dennis Knizley, left, answers a reporter's question on Thursday, June 4, 2015, as co-counsel Jason Darley (holding sign) looks on. Knizley, who won an acquittal for defendant Ramona Yeager, has found success in the courtroom by telling jurors that the courthouse might as well be burned down if they convict his client. (Brendan Kirby/bkirby@al.com)



By **Brendan Kirby**

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It is always difficult to determine what weight a jury gives closing arguments in a criminal case, but in [successfully defending Mobile County Deputy License Commissioner Ramona Yeager](#) against nine corruption counts, defense attorney Dennis Knizley's summation certainly didn't hurt.

Knizley **reached a crescendo** on Wednesday as he told jurors in U.S. District Court that whistleblower Victor Crawford could not be trusted.

"If they ask you to convict a wonderful, sweet woman like this, on the evidence of people like Victor Crawford, we might as well burn the courthouse down because there is no justice," Knizley said.

Powerful stuff.

And familiar to anyone who has followed Knizley's three-decade career patrolling the courtrooms of Mobile and Baldwin counties. It was not the first time Knizley used the imagery of a smoldering courthouse in closing arguments.

In 1997, Knizley told a Mobile County jury it would be better to "burn the courthouse down" than convict Robert Allen of attempted murder on the basis of such weak evidence.

KIM HASTIE TRIAL

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In 2001, he attacked the star witness in a murder case for attributing his changed story about a 1999 fatal shooting to a "series of dreams" he had nearly a year after the incident.

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If Damon Paul Conway were to be convicted based on such "lies and dreams," Knizley said, "then we might as well burn the courthouse down, because there is no justice."

Knizley **dusted off the line again** in what was perhaps his most famous case - the murder trial of former Mobile County Commissioner Stephen Nodine.

"If we're going to do that on this kind of evidence we might as well burn this courthouse down," he said. "Because there is no justice."

Lawyers often develop their own style in the courtroom, and often that means reusing themes that have worked during closing arguments in the past. Assistant U.S. Attorney George May is fond of quoting John Adams' famous "facts are stubborn things," quote from his defense of British soliders tried after the Boston Massacre.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Vicki Davis often peppers her closing arguments with anecdotes about her childhood and homespun wisdom dispensed by her mamma.

Some of Knizley's clients, like Allen, have been convicted. Others, like Conway, have been acquitted. And some, like Nodine, have received a mixed verdict. (In Nodine's case, it was conviction on a misdemeanor ethics charge and a deadlocked jury on the more serious counts).

But Knizley found the "burn down the courthouse" line effective in all of them.

"I actually had retired it with the Nodine case because of the notoriety," Knizley said following Friday's not guilty verdict. "But I brought it back with this case. I felt like this case deserved it, because this woman was so not guilty."

And even if reporters and other lawyers may have heard the line over and over, each jury hears it only once. As the old NBC slogan promoting summer reruns goes, "If you haven't seen it, it's new to you."

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