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Plea agreement reached in killing

Deal means 2 more years behind bars

By Dan Horn

The Cincinnati Enquirer

After two trials and nearly three years in jail, Jermico Clifford finally ended his journey through the court system Tuesday by pleading guilty to voluntary manslaughter.

Mr. Clifford agreed to the plea after Hamilton County prosecutors dropped the more serious charge of aggravated murder.

Mr. Clifford, 22, of Evanston will be sentenced Dec. 8 to five years in prison for shooting to

death Ricardo Hilliard in November 1997.

Clyde Bennett, Mr. Clifford's attorney, said the deal was especially appealing since his client was convicted of aggravated murder in 1998 and sentenced to 56 years in prison.

But Mr. Clifford got another chance when that conviction was tossed out by an appeals court. The court ruled Mr. Clifford was denied a fair trial because a judge ordered some of his relatives out of the courtroom during the trial.

Mr. Clifford went on trial again last year, but that case ended in a mistrial when the jurors were unable to reach a unanimous verdict.

The jury deadlocked with a 10-2 vote to convict.

A third trial was set to begin this week in Common Pleas Court before Judge John Watson. Prosecutors offered the plea deal after several of their witnesses did not show up for the trial.

Mr. Clifford already has served three years in jail, so he has only two years remaining on his sentence.

Prosecutors say Mr. Clifford shot Mr. Hilliard, 36, in the chest while the victim stood on the porch of his Avondale apartment.

They say Mr. Clifford mistakenly thought Mr. Hilliard was the person who, three days earlier, had fired a gun at his head.