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Family, friends gather to protest teen still behind bars after being found mentally unwell

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By Jamiese Price, Reporter CONNECT

PELL CITY, AL (WBRC) - Family and friends gathered Tuesday night calling to 'Free Peyton.'

Nineteen-year-old Peyton Pruitt was arrested last November for providing support for an act of terrorism. Earlier this month, a judge found him not guilty by reason of mental defect, but he remains in jail awaiting another mental evaluation.

"He doesn't deserve to be where he is. He doesn't deserve to be incarcerated by any means. It's a nightmare we can't seem to wake up from," said Tony Pruitt, Peyton's dad.

Tony has been pushing for his son's release for nearly a year.

Peyton is mentally disabled. Tony says Peyton has the mental capacity of an 8-year-old child and jail is no place for him.

"He's mentally disabled, not mentally ill and there's a difference, so there's not a pill or therapy that cures mental disabilities. We want him home. He needs to be home in a loving environment," said Tony.

People rallied behind Tony and Peyton Tuesday evening at the St. Clair County Courthouse, chanting 'Free Peyton.' They held signs and wore t-shirts with his face on the front.

"This should let people know something is wrong with the justice system for incarcerating a person like Peyton," said Guillermo Lopez, a supporter of Peyton.

"This is ridiculous. He's such a harmless kid. I don't understand this at all. After everything he's been through he deserves to come home," said Nicholas Hamrick, Peyton's stepbrother.

Peyton's attorneys, who are working pro bono, said his case shines light on a bigger issue of mental health and the justice system.

"We tend to take individuals who have mental health issues, whether it be an individuals like Peyton who has autism, or someone who has mental retardation, and rather than dealing with those individuals appropriately through the mental health system or through family and family services, more often than not they find themselves in the criminal courthouse. They find themselves sitting in jails and prisons in Alabama," said attorney Edward Merrell.

Peyton will undergo his second mental evaluation on Thursday.

At that point, a judge will determine if he can come home and under what guidelines.

If not, he could be committed to the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

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