

MARYLAND

Friends of defendant testify in Prince George’s murder trial

BY WESLEY ROBINSON

Travon Bennett bragged to his friend that he shot and killed 18-year-old Marckel Ross on Ross’s morning walk to school, a witness testified in Prince George’s County Circuit Court on Wednesday.

“He told me he tried to rob him, and the kid flinched at him . . . then he killed him,” the witness, Kendall Bland, told the jury.

Bland, of Brandywine, said Bennett reenacted how he held the gun and pulled the trigger, adding that Bennett was “a little proud” when he described the

Sept. 11, 2012, shooting.

Bland, 23, was one of several witnesses who testified in Bennett’s first-degree murder trial, which started Monday. Prosecutors said Bennett shot Ross in the chest about 6:40 a.m. during the high school senior’s two-mile walk to Central High School.

Ross, an honor-roll student who was said to walk the same route daily, was carrying an iPhone and wearing a red watch and a pair of expensive sneakers when he was found, said prosecutors, who allege that robbery was Bennett’s central motive.

The shooting rattled Prince

George’s because Ross was the second of six high school students killed over a six-month period between late 2012 and early 2013. The youngest teen who died was 14, and the oldest two, including Ross, were 18.

Jeremy Brown, another friend of Bennett’s, testified Wednesday that Bennett told him that he was going to “bust a move” or rob someone that morning. Then, he said, “he got the [gun] and put it on his waist,” Brown said.

Both Bland and 22-year-old Brown are in the county jail on robbery charges not related to Ross’s death and testified as part

of a plea deal about those charges. Both said they had kept quiet about the slaying to protect Bennett.

Defense attorney Clayton Aarons said Wednesday that the testimony against his client doesn’t stand up.

“The state has no direct evidence,” Aarons said in opening statements, noting that there are no eyewitnesses to the crime and that no one can place Bennett at the scene.

Officers did not arrive on the scene until after Ross was shot, and no suspect was caught on surveillance or seen by witnesses.

Bennett was arrested about six weeks after the slaying, following a separate armed robbery. That incident involved a revolver that matched the gun used in Ross’s slaying, prosecutor Sherrie Waldrup said in opening statements.

Another witness is scheduled to testify Thursday that Bennett confessed to the slaying. Meanwhile, expert witness Scott McVeigh, a Prince George’s police firearms examiner, testified Tuesday that Ross was killed at close range with a revolver.

During their testimony, Bland and Brown testified that while the

gun belonged to Brown, Bennett was the only person who could have used the gun, which was kept in Brown’s room. Brown said that he kept the gun under lock and key and that the only people who knew where the key was in the room were the three men.

During a break in Wednesday’s trial, Elizabeth Ross said her son was loving, fun and caring. She said he was eager to get to school Sept. 11, 2012, because he was graduating that year and couldn’t wait for his brothers.

“They took my best friend,” Elizabeth Ross said.

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THE REGION

Md. teen pursued by police dies of crash injuries

BY LYNH BUI AND PETER HERMANN

A 17-year-old who was fatally injured Monday when a dirt bike he was riding hit a tree in Southeast Washington had been fleeing from Prince George’s County police, his family and authorities said.

The teen, Amir Brooks of Prince George’s, and a cousin were on a green Kawasaki dirt bike when they crashed about 2:40 p.m. at 36th Street and Alabama Avenue.

A police officer saw a dirt bike being operated illegally in the 1900 block of Brooks Drive in District Heights about 2:15 p.m., police said in a statement.

“The officer activated his lights and attempted to verify with the dispatcher whether the dirt bike was connected to a recent armed robbery at a county business,” the statement said. “While awaiting confirmation, the officer pursued the fleeing dirt bike in Prince George’s County.”

County officials declined to release additional details, including how fast the officer may have been driving. The county’s Special Investigation Response Team is conducting an administrative investigation, officials said.

Gwendolyn Crump, the D.C. police department’s chief spokeswoman, would say only that the incident remains under investigation. D.C. police said they were not involved until after the crash.

Amir’s mother, Pamela Brooks, said that according to what police and her son’s cousin told her, the teens were riding at an apartment complex near Marlboro Pike and Brooks Drive in Maryland.

One of the boys’ hats blew off, and Amir turned around on the bike to fetch it, Brooks said, and that’s when police in the complex began following the teens. Some-



Prince George’s police said they saw a dirt bike operated illegally and pursued Amir Brooks and a relative.

how, the incident took them into the District, Brooks said, where Amir and his cousin lost control of the bike and crashed. It’s illegal to ride a dirt bike on Maryland or D.C. roads.

“It’s not like they robbed a bank,” Brooks said. “Why did you chase them?”

Amir’s cousin, who may have suffered a concussion in the crash, has said he remembers lights flashing on a police car behind them, said Lavonne Coates, a longtime friend of the family who spoke on its behalf.

“It’s not like they robbed a bank. Why did you chase them? . . . It’s horrible. I am trying to figure out what is going on.”

Pamela Brooks, mother of Amir Brooks

THE DISTRICT

U-Minn. seeks to bar Redskins’ name at stadium

BY IAN SHAPIRA

The University of Minnesota is working with the Minnesota Vikings in an effort to keep the Washington Redskins’ name from being used in “promotional and game date materials” during the NFL teams’ Nov. 2 game at the school’s stadium in Minneapolis, according to an Aug. 1 letter from university President Eric W. Kaler to U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.).

It is unclear to what degree the Vikings are collaborating in this process.

Kaler was responding to a June letter from McCollum to Minnesota Vikings owner Zygi Wilf — to which the university president was copied — urging the owner to condemn the Redskins’ team name. McCollum argued that Wilf needed to take a stand against “that hateful slur” because all of the NFL teams split the sales of their licensed merchandise equally.

“The time for debate has ended — the name of the Washington

franchise is clearly an offensive racial slur,” McCollum wrote to Wilf. “I urge you, as an NFL team owner, to not remain silent on this matter any longer.”

Redskins spokesman Tony Wylie said Wednesday night that the team disagrees with the school’s effort to bar the Redskins’ name for the game at TCF Bank Stadium, the University of Minnesota stadium. “We have met many native Americans from Minnesota who agree with our position and feel we are using the term correctly and honorably,” he said.

Lester Bagley, the Vikings’ executive vice president of public affairs, said Wednesday night that the team is still deciding how it will handle the college’s request to eliminate the use of the Redskins’ name for the Nov. 2 game. He said Vikings and school officials met once on the issue, in late July at the university, but plan on further talks between now and November.

“We take the issue very seriously, but we’re just getting ready for our season and we’ve been very

focused on training camp and the preseason, and to be honest, we don’t have a game plan for our Nov. 2 game versus Washington,” Bagley said.

Daniel Snyder, the Redskins’ owner, recently went on ESPN 980’s “The Drive” with former player Chris Cooley and defended the team name, and cited other professional sports teams with Native American names, such as the Atlanta Braves and the Kansas City Chiefs.

McCollum wrote the letter in the wake of the decision of the U.S. Patent and Trademark office to cancel the Redskins’ trademark registration. The ruling by the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board marked an enormous victory for opponents of the team’s name, but the decision does not deprive the team from selling its T-shirts and paraphernalia.

McCollum alleged that the Redskins’ presence at the university’s stadium would violate the institution’s Board of Regents’ policy on affirmative action, diversity and

equal opportunity. She also noted that the stadium was built with funding from the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux.

It was unclear whether the university decided to take its own actions based on McCollum’s encouragement. The university is hosting all of the Vikings’ home games while the NFL team awaits the construction of its new stadium. The Associated Press has reported that the Vikings will pay the university \$250,000 for every game.

In his letter to McCollum, Kaler said the Redskins name is “offensive and should be replaced.” Kaler went on to say that the University of Minnesota is “working with the Vikings to make every effort to eliminate the use of Washington’s team name” on game day.

He added that the college and the Vikings are talking with the “American Indian community to ensure a peaceful, positive and safe event for fans while also providing space for protest and expression.”

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VIRGINIA

State GOP treasurer resigns over comments about Muslim Americans

BY JENNA PORTNOY

A Virginia GOP official who posted a message on his Facebook page that questioned whether Muslim Americans have made positive contributions to U.S. society has resigned.

Bob FitzSimmonds, treasurer of the state Republican Party, distributed his resignation letter to

party officials Wednesday night.

“It seems that no matter how careful I might be, I will periodically give occasion for others to portray the party in a bad light, so long as I am a party official. After discussion with several party leaders it seems clear that I will either need to stop posting on social media or step down from my party office,” he wrote in a one-page

letter to members of the party’s State Central Committee.

FitzSimmonds was unapologetic for his comments. In the letter, he said his resignation will not take effect until his position has been filled, which he said will likely happen after a state GOP meeting Aug. 16.

Last week, FitzSimmonds posted a comment about a message from President Obama marking the end of Ramadan and praising Muslims for helping to build “the very fabric of our nation and strengthening the core of our democracy.”

“Exactly what part of our nation’s fabric was woven by Muslims?” Fitz-

Simmonds wrote. “What about Sikhs, Animists, and Jainists? Should we be thanking them too?”

Pat Mullins and Michael E. Thomas, the chairman and vice chairman of the state GOP, later called on FitzSimmonds to resign.

Last Thursday, two top-ranking party officials told The Washington Post that FitzSimmonds had offered Mullins his resignation. But FitzSimmonds, who has not responded to repeated requests from The Post for comment, denied to a conservative blogger and on his own Facebook page that he had made such an offer.

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MARYLAND

Pr. George’s leads state in number of carjackings

BY ASHLEY HALSEY III

The drive-through window was open for breakfast an hour before dawn and cars were lined up when a peculiar thing happened: A speeding silver SUV plowed into the window at a right angle and caught fire.

The setting was Landover Hills. The restaurant was McDonald’s. The SUV had been carjacked moments earlier.

Though peculiar in its conclusion, the way it began was not extraordinary. Carjackings occur every other day on average in Prince George’s County, which leads the state in such crimes, according to recent statistics.

The county had 183 carjackings in 2012, according to the Maryland Uniform Crime Report, eclipsing Baltimore City, with 176; and dwarfing adjacent Montgomery County, which recorded 10 carjackings.

The carjacking that ended with a crash at the drive-through window began just a few minutes earlier. Prince George’s County police said on July 29, a man approached the SUV at a stoplight at 71st Avenue and Annapolis Road. When the driver refused him a ride, the man implied he had a weapon. The driver jumped out; the man jumped in and drove away.

As the SUV raced down Annapolis Road, it clipped two other vehicles, one of them a white minivan, whose driver pursued the SUV until the crash at McDonald’s.

Carjackings declined sharply in Prince George’s after the recession ended, dropping from 355 in 2008 to 162 incidents in 2011. There were 21 more in 2012 than the previous year, and 2013 statistics are scheduled for release in a few weeks.

“We’re not happy with one carjacking or any crime in PG County, but we’re working hard to move in the right direction,” county police department spokesman Lt. William Alexander said in a telephone interview.

“Carjacking is a crime of opportunity — a thief, with bad intentions, searching for the most vulnerable prey,” said John

B. Townsend II of AAA. “In most carjacking cases nationwide, the intended quarry is alone when the attack occurs.”

There are an average of 49,000 carjackings nationwide each year.

Across Maryland in 2012, the number of carjackings dropped slightly — from 480 in 2011 to 473 — and was far lower than the 836 at the height of the recession in 2008. (The District and Virginia combine carjacking data with related crimes, such as robbery and auto theft.)

“Carjacking is a crime of opportunity — a thief, with bad intentions, searching for the most vulnerable prey.”

John B. Townsend II of AAA

In breaking down the carjackings, Maryland found that most carjackers were men, as were most of their victims: 67 percent. Almost half the victims were younger than 26.

Parking lots, driveways and gas stations, places where carjackers could intercept drivers with the keys in their hand or car, were among the favored locations for the crime.

There were 60 incidents in apartment parking lots, 37 in shopping center lots, one in a church parking lot and 34 in other lots. The state reported 55 carjackings at intersections, 41 at gas stations and 30 in home driveways.

Guns or knives were used in 337 incidents, and 54 percent of the crimes took place between 6 p.m. and 1 a.m. The state reported 75 arrests for carjacking that year.

In the July 29 incident, the carjacker jumped from the SUV after it crashed into the McDonald’s and ran. A 21-year-old suspect, Dominique Harrison, was arrested and faces charges related to the carjacking and subsequent crashes, police said.

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VIRGINIA

U-Va. board abandons plan to quiet dissent

BY NICK ANDERSON

A proposal meant to silence dissenters on the governing board of Virginia’s flagship public university was officially scuttled Wednesday, days after state lawmakers raised an outcry.

The initial version of a “statement of expectations” for the University of Virginia’s Board of Visitors had stated that board members should not speak out publicly on board decisions — “whether past, present or imminent” — without permission from the board’s leader. The proposal drew sharp criticism after it surfaced publicly last week.

A revised version, now posted on the board’s Web site, omits that provision.

Instead, the proposal says: “If Visitors wish to address a board matter outside of the boardroom, they should make clear that they are speaking in their capacity as an individual board member and not on behalf of the Board or the University.”

How and when board members can speak up has become a sensitive topic at the elite university in Charlottesville since the attempted ouster of U-Va. Presi-

dent Teresa A. Sullivan.

In early June 2012, Sullivan resigned under pressure from board leaders, but the board voted later that month to reinstate her after an uprising among students, faculty members and alumni.

The board, which is appointed by the governor, has also debated the strategic direction of the university and U-Va.’s commitment to aid students in financial need, among other sensitive issues.

Lawmakers have said robust debate is appropriate for a board that oversees a university founded by Thomas Jefferson.

The draft proposal for board expectations was developed with help from a consultant, Dick Chait, whose contract is capped at \$200,000.

U-Va. spokesman McGregor McCance said a board committee on governance and engagement will continue to study and revise the proposal. The full board plans to discuss it in September. McCance said the board’s leader, Rector George Martin, was unavailable Wednesday for comment.

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