

FINALLY, JUSTICE - A WITNESS TO A DEADLY SHOOTING AND HIS FIANCEE ARE MURDERED, LEAVING BEHIND A BABY. THE CASE CONSUMES A PROSECUTOR AND A COP FOR THREE YEARS. TODAY, A KILLER WILL BE SENTENCED TO LIFE.

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Wednesday, September 28, 2005

Author: BEN SCHMITT, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

When the two men kicked in the door at 4 a.m., Robert Richards and his fiancée were asleep upstairs in their two-story townhouse in Taylor. A light snow was falling outside, and it was the holiday season - five days before Thanksgiving 2002.

The intruders had AK47 assault rifles - military weapons capable of firing 60 rounds in rapid succession. The men sprinted up the stairs, burst into the master bedroom and started spraying the couple with bullets. Richards was hit 18 times, five times in the head. His 23-year-old fiancée, Raime Denson, was shot 10 times.

Police quickly figured out why the couple had been executed:

Robert Richards had done his civic duty.

Eight months earlier, Richards, a 28-year-old Ford Motor Co. employee, had been at a party at a banquet hall in Hamtramck when a fight broke out. He had watched as a man opened fire on a crowd in the parking lot. One person had died; two more were injured.

And Richards came forward, without prodding, to testify, to help identify the killer.

What Richards didn't know was that the killer, William Johnson, had friends. He was a drug dealer, police said, and those friends wanted to ensure Richards' silence - though to this day there's no hard evidence Johnson ever ordered the hit.

The slayings in Taylor left a long trail of woe: from the grandmother who was left to play mother to Richards and Denson's 2-month-old daughter; to the cop who promised her the killers would be brought to justice; to the prosecutor who worked with Richards on the Hamtramck case and had to live with the pangs of conscience while fighting to close the case against the killers.

They've waited nearly three years for today.

Jerame Durrell Crowe, 32, of Detroit is scheduled to be sentenced this morning to life in prison for the murders of Richards and Denson. His accomplice, Davon Griggs, took a plea deal and testified against **Crowe**.

"He was the final piece," Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Robert Moran said of Griggs on Monday. "It leaves a nasty taste in my mouth that we had to cut a deal, but we needed more to connect **Crowe** to the homicide.

"I may try cases that make Court TV or national news," he added, "but I'll never try a case that's more important to me than this."

Deaths eat at prosecutor

Moran is known by his colleagues for his dry wit, practical jokes and attention to detail. A prosecutor for 16 years, he supervises Wayne County's homicide division, composed of 10 lawyers, who handle about 250 cases a year.

"He's one of those people whose wheels are always spinning," colleague Bob Stevens said. "Prosecuting is in his blood."

Some of Moran's high-profile cases include trials involving the southwest Detroit street gang the Cash Flow Posse and Anthony Bailey, who killed three of his children before setting a house on fire in Detroit.

When he's not working, Moran, 40, is shuffling his two kids to soccer games and watching movie classics - "North by Northwest" and "Casablanca" are favorites - in a studio he has built in his basement.

Working in Detroit, Moran says, has given him a lot of experience prosecuting homicides. But it was the Richards-Denson murders that kept him up nights and accounted for his losing 25 pounds.

"These were people that were starting a life together, and here you have a guy who is doing the right thing in being a witness for us," Moran said. "I'm not exaggerating - I could count on one hand the times I slept through the night since this couple was killed."

Even after his death, Richards' preliminary examination testimony in September 2002 was strong enough to help prosecutors convict Johnson of the Hamtramck murder. But Moran couldn't shake the dismay over losing a witness. He had always told witnesses that coming forward was the best way to show they couldn't be pushed around.

Richards, Moran said, had been a great witness, with an amazing memory for detail. He could describe the gunman's varsity-type jacket, Timberland boots and jeans.

"He was one of the best eyewitnesses I ever had," Moran said.

Crowe, one of the two men who killed Richards, was at Johnson's preliminary hearing. According to Moran, a federal agent saw **Crowe** write down Richards' name. But Richards said he felt safe in Taylor.

Two months later, Moran got the call from Taylor police that Richards and Denson were dead.

By chance, their daughter, Riana, had spent the night with their grandmother.

The knock that changed everything

Pat Kaczynski remembers the loud knock on her door that startled her that November morning. Riana had just wakened and was sucking baby formula from a bottle. It was 6 a.m.

"Do you know Raime Denson?" the uniformed officer asked.

"Yes, she's my daughter," Kaczynski said, clutching the girl.

"Can we come in?" said the officer. "Do you want me to hold the baby?"

The next few minutes are a blur to Kaczynski now. She remembers crying uncontrollably and handing Riana to a neighbor, who had stopped by when she saw police at the house.

The police wanted information on Richards. Kaczynski told them he had witnessed a murder. The next day brought a trip to the morgue, then a trip to the townhouse. Kaczynski recalled the slew of bullet holes. The bloody walls had already been painted black.

Kaczynski told police about Richards' testimony, and Taylor police told her that Johnson headed a drug ring dubbed by Detroit cops and prosecutors as the Johnson Crime Family - a drug ring that police said controlled dealing along Wabash between I-75 and Grand River.

Kaczynski rattled off to authorities the couple's story, how they met while attending Western Michigan University. She told them about their jobs at Ford. Richards worked in marketing; Denson, security.

"I wanted them to know right away that they weren't into anything: They were into their baby, into their jobs and into their wedding," she said. "I had a feeling that they were suspicious, and I wanted to set them straight right away."

'We're going to solve this'

The crime scene turned Officer Jim Martin's stomach.

An ex-minor league leftie and nine-year veteran of the Taylor force, Martin had handled about four homicides. He became a cop after a rotator cuff injury took him out of the Pittsburgh Pirates' farm system and back to Eastern Michigan University, where he earned a criminal justice degree.

Martin, 35, said the Richards-Denson death scene was the goriest he'd ever witnessed.

"We didn't know what we had - maybe a domestic case - we weren't sure," he said.

The case turned personal when he learned the dead couple had a baby girl. Martin has three kids of his own.

For the next three years, he would talk to Kaczynski weekly, keeping her up to speed on the investigation. He'd push and prod to keep the case going, coordinating efforts among the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and Hamtramck police. He and other Taylor police even organized an annual golf tournament to raise money for Riana's college fund.

When he got promoted to sergeant last year, he begged to be allowed to stay on the case. He had made a promise to Kaczynski.

"We're not going to forget you," Martin had told her. "We're going to solve this."

His bosses let him stay on the case.

But it wasn't easy. Investigators developed tips from a confidential informant about **Crowe** and Griggs but didn't have any evidence tying them to the murders.

The break came in December 2003, when a self-described car thief, Angelo Hardin, came forward and told police he had stolen two cars for **Crowe** and Griggs - cars police had recovered about a mile from the shootings.

Hardin said **Crowe** told him they needed the cars as part of a plan to get William Johnson out of jail.

A few weeks later, Keith Johnson, William Johnson's uncle, agreed to cooperate with the murder investigation: Keith Johnson was facing a federal indictment on drug dealing charges and offered up information in exchange for a sentence reduction.

In June 2004, Keith Johnson wore a wiretap and talked with Griggs, an acquaintance. Prosecutors say Griggs admitted to the shootings and provided details.

Prosecutors had provided a fake police report on the shootings, filled with incorrect details to see if they could trap Griggs. Keith Johnson, known as KJ, cited the incorrect report, mentioning to Griggs that it said shotguns were used.

Griggs corrected him: "No man, we had AKs."

On Nov. 15, 2004, Moran drove to Taylor for a court hearing in the case. Keith Johnson agreed to meet him at the Taylor Police Department.

He never showed.

A few hours later, Moran learned that Keith Johnson was dead of a gunshot wound to the head. Officers found him in a southwest Detroit home.

Turning one against the other

Moran panicked.

He sped home and called a locksmith. He changed all his locks that night, fearing - though no evidence proved it - that Keith Johnson was killed in a hit.

"I thought about protection for my family," he said. "I thought about quitting. I figured if someone could reach out and snatch KJ, they could do anything they wanted. He was the man in the organization. If they could get to him, they could get to anybody."

The Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office has never determined whether the death was a homicide. No one has ever been charged.

But there were problems with the case against **Crowe** and Griggs. All prosecutors had was Hardin's testimony that he stole the cars for the gunmen and another witness who said he overheard the two discussing the killings. The tape, Moran figured, would be inadmissible with Keith Johnson dead.

District Judge William Sutherland agreed to send the case to trial. But he agreed with a defense lawyer's argument that Moran had only circumstantial evidence at that point.

"I understand it's a very slim case," he told lawyers on both sides.

Moran needed more: He needed to flip one of the suspects against the other.

By May 2005, there was a deal for Griggs, whose voice was on the tape: Plead guilty to second-degree murder, avoid mandatory life, and testify against **Crowe**. Griggs, 25, of Detroit went for it.

"Ultimately, it came down to a choice," Moran said. "This way, I could make sure both defendants were convicted and sent away for a long time."

Moran said if he had to choose, **Crowe** was the worst of the two. In the Richards-Denson killings, Griggs shot five times and ran while **Crowe**, also armed with a 9mm handgun, reloaded at one point and kept shooting, Moran said.

After a weeklong jury trial in Wayne County Circuit Court, **Crowe** was convicted of first-degree murder on Sept. 8.

Martin embraced Denson's mom. He wept.

"I made her a promise," Martin said.

Griggs' sentencing is scheduled for Monday. He'll receive 15 to 30 years as part of his deal.

'I planned on being a grandma'

Today, Kaczynski will stand in front of **Crowe** and talk about what he took from her. She'll talk

about her daughter, how she loved academics, softball, basketball and cheerleading.

She'll talk about her daughter's love for Richards.

In her Southgate home last week, Kaczynski introduced 3-year-old Riana to a visitor. The girl said cheerily: "I'm Riana Richards."

Kaczynski, 58, a retired Ford assembly worker, suffers from arthritis. She has weak knees.

"It's a joy raising Riana," she said. "But it's hard because I planned on being a grandma."

As Kaczynski spoke of her daughter, she began to cry. Riana got her a tissue.

"Don't cry, Grandma," she said.

At one point, Riana picked up a telephone and pretended to talk to her mommy and daddy.

"She does that sometimes," Kaczynski said. "I don't know why she does that. She knows they're in heaven."

Later, Kaczynski played a video from Aug. 5, 2002 - Denson's baby shower, where Richards proposed to her in front of 150 people.

"Listen to that squeaky voice," she said. "Raime was my life. She was my best friend. I just want to hold her.

"We lost so much when we lost them. You hear about closure. There's no closure to anything."

Contact BEN SCHMITT at 313-223-4296 or schmitt@freepress.com.

ILLUSTRATION: Graphic by JOHN W. FLEMING AND BEN SCHMITT Detroit Free Press; Photo Taylor Police Department; Photos by AMY LEANG/Detroit Free Press

CAPTION: Pat Kaczynski, 58, hugs her granddaughter Riana Richards, 3, in their Southgate home last week. Behind them is a painting of Riana's slain parents, Robert Richards and Raime Denson, holding her after she was born.

Robert Richards and Raime Denson were killed Nov. 22, 2002. Richards had proposed at Denson's baby shower three months before.

Pat Kaczynski watches Riana play with the locket. She called the killers cowards. "They really were. ... They took two parents from this baby."

Riana Richards shows off a locket containing photos of her parents. Police say they think Riana's parents were killed because her father had witnessed a murder and had chosen to testify. The night they were killed, Riana, then 2 months old, was staying with her grandmother.

Robert Richards and Raime Denson lived in this Taylor townhouse with their daughter. The attackers entered by kicking in the front door.

CAPTIONWRITER: For Taylor Police Sgt. Jim Martin, left, and Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Robert Moran, putting away the men who killed Richards and Denson was personal.

MEMO: SEE GRAPHIC SHOWING THOSE INVOLVED IN THE HOMICIDES AND A TIMELINE IN MICROFILM, PAGE 8A.

DISCLAIMER: THIS ELECTRONIC VERSION MAY DIFFER SLIGHTLY FROM THE PRINTED ARTICLE

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS; NEWS

Page: 1A

Index Terms: court; trial; sentencing; plea; Davon Griggs; Jerame Durrell Crowe ;major story; Robert Richards; Raime Denson; homicide; multiple; witness; Taylor; William Johnson

Record Number: dfp0000181591

Copyright (c) Detroit Free Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.