

RAPIST HELD IN SLAYING AT MAXEY SOCIAL WORKER WAS STRANGLERED IN LOUNGE

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A Detroit teenager being treated in the sex offenders program at the W.J. Maxey Boys Training School is being held as a suspect in the strangulation death of a social worker.

Police and school officials Monday would not name the suspect, but he was identified by family members and other sources as **Jermell Johnson** , 19.

Johnson is a resident of the Green Oak Center at the school, the state's only maximum security facility for violent juveniles. He had been sent to the center near Whitmore Lake in 1990 after being convicted of first-degree criminal sexual conduct.

The victim, Barbara Glenn Synnestvedt, 46, of Birmingham, was found by a coworker about 8 p.m. Sunday in a locked employee lounge, said State Police Lt. William Pertner, commander of the Brighton Post.

An autopsy at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing on Monday showed Synnestvedt died of asphyxiation, an official said. Investigators were trying to determine if she had been sexually assaulted.

Pertner said the victim appeared to have struggled with her attacker. Evidence found in the lounge and on the suspect linked him to the crime, but investigators would not describe that evidence.

Police have not determined how the attacker got into the lounge.

Synnestvedt's death is the first slaying at any of the state's 18 juvenile detention facilities, said Chuck Peller, spokesman for the state Department of Social Services.

The Green Oak Center, which houses about 100 youths convicted of violent crimes, was locked down Monday. The suspect, who has not been formally charged, was being held under close security, Pertner said.

In 1990, **Johnson** , then 16, pleaded guilty to three counts of rape after he attacked a neighbor in her car.

Recorder's Court Chief Judge Dalton Roberson sentenced **Johnson** to five years' probation at Maxey. He was to be held there until age 21.

Grace Robinson, **Johnson** 's grandmother, sobbed Monday after a social worker from Maxey called and told her **Johnson** was a suspect in the killing.

She said she took in **Johnson** and his two younger brothers after their mother beat **Johnson** with a pool cue when he was about 12. The mother was shot to death by an acquaintance during an domestic dispute in October 1987, Robinson said.

She said her grandson had done well in therapy at Maxey and was earning good grades in courses offered by Washtenaw County Community College.

"I was bragging about that to my friends and my family," she said. "I said how many kids do you find getting A's and B's in their college classes?"

Last fall, Maxey social worker Paula **Johnson** wrote in an evaluation that **Johnson** had developed goals to improve antisocial behavior and was becoming a leader in group therapy discussions.

Recently, **Johnson** was allowed to leave the school for unsupervised visits with his grandmother at her home.

Robinson said she received a letter from **Johnson** last week saying he had landed a job at Maxey, was making good money and was trying to set up a visit with her on Mother's Day weekend.

At the school Monday, Gerald Miller, state DSS director, which operates juvenile facilities, said a crisis team had been brought in to counsel other staff members stunned by Synnestvedt's slaying.

The victim began her career as a social worker after raising her four children, DSS officials said.

She earned an associate's degree in mental health from Oakland Community College in 1987. She received a bachelor's in social work from Eastern Michigan University in 1990 and master's in social work from the University of Michigan in 1991.

She had been working at the Maxey school since September. She completed an internship there in 1991 and worked for a crisis intervention center and Clinton Valley Regional Psychiatric Hospital before returning.

At Maxey, she did family and group counseling. She was not assigned to work with **Johnson** , but had worked with him when she was an intern.

Her immediate family could not be reached for comment Monday.

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