

## **BULLETS FLY WHEN PATIENCE RUNS OUT - SUSPECTS' STATEMENTS DESCRIBE BOTCHED SEARCH FOR DRUGS AND MONEY THAT LEFT 2 BOYS DEAD**

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Monday, April 16, 2007

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Second part of a two-part report.

Ronell Thompson was rolling. At 23, he had a Cadillac and had just moved **out** of his mother's house and into a bungalow on Mansfield Street on Detroit's west side.

A classmate from high school told police that Thompson discussed his drug-selling **when** the two spoke Feb. 21 in the living room of Thompson's house. Some of the proceeds - \$13,000 in cash - sat on a table between them in a plastic bag, Deandre Witherspoon said.

Witherspoon, released about a week earlier after serving eight months for breaking and entering, watched Thompson take the bag to the basement. Then, Witherspoon said, they talked "about the past and me staying **out** of trouble since I got **out** of jail."

He wouldn't stay **out** of trouble for long. That night, Witherspoon told his girlfriend's mother, a convicted drug dealer named Sonya O'Neal, about what he had seen at Thompson's house. O'Neal didn't bite at first, Witherspoon said, so he brought it up again two days later.

"I'm telling y'all that [expletive] is in the basement," Witherspoon said. "Just go in and go straight to the basement," he said, according to O'Neal's statement to police.

And O'Neal, now convinced of the potential for a quick score of drugs and money, told police that she spread the word to her cousin and a few friends.

Witherspoon wasn't the only person to see drug money at the house, in exactly the spot he described. At least two of Thompson's young cousins, boys he often had over to play video games, also told police they saw it.

Jayvon Scarber, 15, saw not only money in the ceiling but "a big block of cocaine, maybe like a loaf of bread" at the house. "He had some every time I came over."

Earl Herron, 17, said he saw drugs in Thompson's kitchen safe.

Thompson had just completed a probation sentence for a 2005 drug arrest, but to Jayvon and Herron and Thompson's other cousins, including Herron's 13-year-old brother, Orlando, and their cousin, Darren Johnson, 11, the house was just a good place to play video games and hang **out**.

There is no evidence that any of the boys were involved in Thompson's activities or that Orlando and Darren knew anything about the drugs.

Orlando "just used to say that Ronell was cool," said another cousin, Jasmine Lockhart, 17.

"There was no reason for me to feel like they couldn't go over there," said Orlando's 36-year-old mother, Yvonne Lockhart. "They went over there, like, every other weekend."

Robbery plot gets under way

That Friday, Feb. 23, was no different. Thompson was hosting his young cousins at the house where he had moved about four months earlier with his girlfriend, Devin Raines, 20.

Some of the kids were supposed to go to Lansing to visit a relative, but the plans fell through, and Thompson's Sony PlayStation 3 awaited.

Orlando's younger brother, Torris, got a ride home from Thompson's house that day. But there wasn't room in the car for Orlando, so he stayed with his brother, Herron, and cousins Darren and Jayvon. Jayvon had been at the house nearly a week.

Meanwhile, the plot to rob Thompson was moving along. The following account is compiled from statements, sometimes conflicting, made to police by the suspects and others who were in the house that night.

About 7:30 p.m., Witherspoon drove past the home with O'Neal and her cousin, Torrisandois Lyons, 42, to show them where Thompson lived. They returned to O'Neal's home on Orleans on Detroit's east side about 8:15 p.m., and Witherspoon called Thompson, telling him to come over and bring some cocaine.

O'Neal called a friend, Charles Moore, 38.

"Sonya asked me if I wanted to make some quick money," Moore said. "I said 'no,' but she was like: 'Chill, this is quick and easy and worth your while. You need to get over here right away before I call somebody else.' "

Thompson said he took his girlfriend's red Ford Focus and headed to O'Neal's house. He arrived to find an AK47 rifle in his face. Lyons taped Thompson's hands behind his back with duct tape. **When** drugs fell **out** of Thompson's pocket, someone picked them up and gave them to O'Neal. Thompson was asked for more.

"Ronell kept saying that he had dope at the house, but it was nothing like Deandre was saying," Lyons said, referring to Witherspoon.

Thompson was taken **out** and put in the trunk of the Focus. Lyons and Robert Reed, 26, got in with O'Neal behind the wheel. Moore followed in his gold Ford Taurus with his girlfriend, Lenore Sims, in the passenger seat.

Frenzied search for money begins

Back on Mansfield, the kids had eaten coney dogs and played video games. Darren called his father about 9:30 p.m. and said he was ready to go home.

Around that time, O'Neal and the others were making the 14-mile crosstown trip. After pulling up on Mansfield, they took Thompson **out** of the trunk and, with the push of the front door, the frenzied search for money and drugs that would leave two boys dead began.

Orlando and Darren were in the living room. Herron was in the kitchen. Jayvon was using the computer in the living room. Reed, Lyons and O'Neal barged in holding guns, Lyons said. O'Neal denied wielding a gun. Moore also said he wasn't armed.

Two of the suspects said O'Neal and the others yelled for everyone to get down. Thompson was pushed into a chair at the same table where he had shown off his drug earnings. The four boys hit the floor as ordered.

"They kept asking me where the money was," Thompson said. "I told them there was no money. They kept asking over and over."

Not satisfied, one of the men grabbed Herron by the shirt, forcing him to the basement and badgering him for information on where the money was hidden. Herron, talking through tears, said he didn't know, "then they started kicking me and saying if they found money they were going to kill me."

One of the men soon brought Jayvon down to the basement and held a gun in his face demanding money. He was ordered onto the floor next to Herron. That left Orlando and Darren upstairs with the intruders.

O'Neal headed to the basement and tore down ceiling tiles. She also admitted searching a dresser. At some point, she went upstairs to the bedroom where Thompson's girlfriend, Raines, lay on a bed. Raines said O'Neal and Reed demanded money and forced her head into a pillow.

**When** she looked up and pointed to her purse, she said O'Neal struck her in the head. Raines said \$1,200 and a gold ring was taken from the purse.

Suspect opens fire

In the living room, Lyons continued to question Thompson about drugs and money, but Thompson said it wasn't there. Lyons opened fire.

"I got fed up with Ronell playing me," Lyons told police.

Thompson, hit in the arm, leg and torso, fell **out** of the chair.

"I played dead," he said.

Then Thompson said he heard someone open fire on Orlando and Darren.

"I could hear them shoot my two little cousins," Thompson said. "I couldn't see it. I just heard it."

Both were shot in the head at close range - Orlando, three times; Darren, once.

Moore implicated O'Neal, saying she ordered Lyons to shoot the boys. **When** Lyons refused, Moore said, O'Neal grabbed Lyons' gun and opened fire on the boys. O'Neal has denied shooting the boys, saying she was outside the house at the time.

Afterward, the intruders fled **out** the front door. Hearing Thompson's pleas, Raines ran down from the bedroom. Her crying brought Jayvon and Herron up from the basement. Afraid, Raines ran back upstairs and called 911 from her bedroom closet. Herron ran to Thompson, asking him where he was shot. He cut the duct tape from his cousin's wrists.

Jayvon then saw blood and Orlando and Darren lying on the living room floor. "They were shot in the head and not moving," he said.

Families get word of the shootings

Darren Johnson Sr. had nearly arrived at Thompson's home **when** he got the call about the shooting. Word quickly spread and family members hurried to the house. They waited outside in the cold, held back by crime-scene tape.

Officers took Herron and Jayvon, dressed in T-shirts, shorts and socks, to separate police cars for questioning. Jayvon's mother, LaChenna Herron-Ray, 34, said she didn't get to speak to her son until 5 a.m.

**When** Jayvon came **out**, "He was crying. It's still hard for him," Herron-Ray said.

Orlando's mother started hyperventilating after she got to the house. She called her sister, Hope Cotton, and screamed into the phone: "He's gone. They took my son. They took my son."

Lockhart was taken to the hospital. Her mother, Yvette Lockhart, identified Orlando's body.

"I just want to know why," said Yvette Lockhart, who said the Lord had his "arms around him **when** this went down."

Police catch the suspects

After leaving the house, O'Neal and some of others went to her home, throwing a mask worn by Lyons **out** the window along the way. A neighbor, Terry Blakely, soon showed up, asking to do his laundry. Lyons asked him to hide a box filled with guns.

"I took the box to my house, put it over the vent and went back to Sonya's and finished my laundry," Blakely told police.

Police rounded up all of them, including Blakely and Witherspoon.

In their statements are fragments that paint a picture of Darren and Orlando as middle school drug dealers. Lyons recounted his belief that the house would be an easy hit because Witherspoon assured them Thompson "only had little kids working for him on Mansfield."

And Moore told police that, just before shooting the boys, O'Neal said they "had something to do with my house getting robbed." The statement led police to investigate whether the boys were shot in retaliation.

In the end, there was no easy money and few drugs to score, only the senseless killing of two children. The police found wrappers for 3 kilograms of cocaine on a table and about a quarter of a kilo of crack in a safe. They found no cash.

Witherspoon, who was at a downtown club **when** the shootings occurred, later said he regretted not warning Thompson about the plan.

"I wish I would have called him because two kids didn't have to die," Witherspoon told police.

On a recent sunny day, Allyson Howard said she thought about how her son, Darren, should have been playing outside. She said her thoughts often drift to the night he died. She has yet to go back to work at her salon, but the ability to sleep is slowly returning.

"I keep thinking about how scared he must have been," she said.

Yvonne Lockhart returned to her job as a warehouse club cashier soon after Orlando's March 3 funeral, unable to sit around the house imagining his death and "wishing I was there to help," she said. Her main consolation, she said, is what she told Orlando's five siblings: "God's got him."

## SIDEBARS

### A LOOK AT THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

#### THE SUSPECTS

All charged with first-degree murder.

Sonya O'Neal

\*Age: 38

\*Convictions: Federal distribution of cocaine; possession of a controlled substance.

\*Told police: Deandre Witherspoon told her that Ronell Thompson had drugs and money in the basement of his home on Mansfield in Detroit, and they devised a plan to rob him. O'Neal said

she was outside **when** shots were fired.

\*Quote: "As I'm leaving **out** and about the time I got to the sidewalk, that's **when** I heard the loud gunshots. Once I'm in the car, Torris and Rob came **out** running with guns in their hands."

Deandre Witherspoon

\*Age: 23

\*Convictions: Domestic violence; breaking and entering; felony fleeing police. Should have been in jail at the time of the shootings, but Wayne County officials did not transfer him to Macomb County officials Feb. 13. He was to have served two weeks in Macomb County on the fleeing and eluding conviction.

\*Told police: He was at Thompson's house a few days before the shootings and that Thompson showed him a plastic bag with \$13,000 in cash that he claimed to have made from selling cocaine.

\*Quote: "The plan was to meet up with him, grab him and take him back to the house and get the money."

Torrisandois Lyons

\*Age: 42

\*Convictions: Possession of a controlled substance.

\*Told police: Witherspoon and O'Neal, his cousin, told him Thompson had \$100,000 and a few kilos of cocaine in his house. He said he shot Thompson two or three times in the stomach.

\*Quote: "Ronell said that if we really wanted the dope, then we needed to go to his cousin's house on Mettetal. We figured that it would be too much of a problem if we went somewhere else. I

figured it would be a lot easier on Mansfield because Deandre said that Ronell only had little kids working for him on Mansfield."

Terry Blakely

\*Age: 51

\*Convictions: None.

\*Told police: **When** he went to O'Neal's house to do laundry a few hours after the shooting, Lyons gave him a box of guns to hide.

\*Quote: "Torris kept calling me. He came down to the basement with the box and asked me to

take it to my house. I took the box to my house, put it over the vent and went back to Sonya's and finished my laundry."

Charles Moore

\*Age: 38

\*Convictions: Five counts of breaking and entering.

\*Told police: O'Neal called him and told him that she had a scheme to make some easy money by robbing Thompson. During the robbery, Moore said, O'Neal snatched a gun from Lyons and shot the boys.

\*Quote: "Sonya looks down at the kids and told Torris, 'Shoot them [expletive].' Torris just stood there and looked at Sonya like, 'I'm not doing it.' Sonya walked up to Torris and snatched the gun and said, 'Give me the [expletive] gun, [expletive].' "

Lenore Sims

\*Age: 44; died last month of a suspected drug overdose.

\*Convictions: None.

\*Told police: She accompanied Moore, her boyfriend, and the others on the drive to the Mansfield home. She said she did not go inside.

\*Quote: "Charlie came **out** . ... He said, 'Sonya snapped.' "

Robert Reed

\*Age: 36

\*Convictions: Attempted criminal sexual conduct.

\*Told police: Did not make a statement.

THE VICTIMS

Orlando Herron

\*Age: 13; fatally shot three times in the head.

\*Quote, from his mom: "I have six kids. **Out** of my six, he was one of the quietest ones. People are going to say mean things, but my son was not involved in drugs in any way."

Darren Johnson

\*Age: 11; fatally shot once in the head.

\*Quote (from Valentine's Day letter to his mom): "I will help by getting all As on my report card."

Ronell Thompson

\*Age: 23; shot three times.

\*Told police: He went to O'Neal's house on Orleans to sell cocaine. **When** he got there, a man pointed an AK47 at his head, and three other men tied him up and threw him in the trunk of his car. They took him back to his house and demanded money and drugs.

\*Quote: "I told them there was no money in the house and they kept asking over and over. One of the guys shot me first in my chest and midsection. I fell over and played dead. I could hear them shoot my two little cousins."

Earl Herron

\*Age: 17; Orlando's brother and Thompson's cousin.

\*Told police: He knew Thompson sold narcotics and that Thompson had drugs in a safe in the kitchen the day of the shootings.

\*Quote (describing a suspect, allegedly Charles Moore): "He kept saying, 'Where's the money?' I said that I didn't know. Then they started kicking me, saying if they found money they were going to kill me."

JayvOn Scarber

\*Age: 15; Thompson's cousin.

\*Told police: He often saw cocaine at Thompson's house and that Thompson kept money in a grocery bag in the basement ceiling.

\*Quote (about what drugs he saw at Thompson's house): "A big block of cocaine, maybe like a loaf of bread. He had some every time I came over."

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ILLUSTRATION: Photo

CAPTION:

HUGH GRANNUM / Detroit Free Press

Charles Moore, left, Sonya O'Neal, Torrisandois Lyons, Terry Blakely and Deandre Witherspoon are charged in the deaths of Darren Johnson, 11, and Orlando Herron, 13. A sixth suspect, Robert Reed, is not pictured, and another, Leonore Sims, died last month. According to some of their statements to police, the suspects sought to rob the boys' cousin.

FOLLOWING PHOTO RAN WITH FIRST SIDEBAR:

HUGH GRANNUM / Detroit Free Press

Sonya O'Neal told police she and Deandre Witherspoon made up a plan to rob Ronell Thompson.

CAPTIONWRITER: Darren Johnson, left, and Orlando Herron died.

MEMO: SECOND PART OF A TWO-PART REPORT.;CHILDREN IN THE CROSS FIRE  
SPECIAL REPORT;SERIES

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

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS; NEWS

Page: 1A

Index Terms: homicide; juvenile; shooting;namelist;Ronell Thompson; Darren Johnson; Darren  
Johnson;Series

Record Number: dfp0000417327

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