

SLAYING TARGET FEARED DRUG GANG ATTORNEY SAYS VICTIM WAS ASKED TO SNITCH

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Wednesday, May 13, 1992

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Shortly before he was slain in Detroit last weekend, Alfred Austin agonized over whether to snitch on the reputed top man in a notorious drug gang, saying, "Look, I can't finger **Terrance Brown** and walk the streets of Detroit safely."

"He hadn't made up his mind whether to cooperate or not," Austin's court-appointed attorney, Robert Cetrulo, said Tuesday. "Then he shows up dead."

Cetrulo said he and Austin recently held a conference telephone call with a U.S. attorney in Kentucky over Austin's getting leniency on a federal gun-running charge in exchange for information on members of the Best Friends.

The Detroit drug gang rose to power in the mid-1980s and appears to be re-emerging with **Terrance Brown** as a leader, investigators have said. His brother, Reginald Brown, was released from prison in February.

"They wanted to get to his higher-ups," Cetrulo said of the federal investigators. When Austin asked whether that meant "Terrance," he shuddered at the confirmation, Cetrulo said.

Austin was to go to trial today on charges that he paid accomplices to buy guns for him. Because Austin probably would have gotten just eight to 14 months on a conviction, Cetrulo said he told his client the deal wasn't worth the risk to his safety, even though he was invited to join a witness protection program.

Austin, 26, may have been leaning toward rejecting the deal, Cetrulo said.

A federal official Tuesday said Austin told the hierarchy of Best Friends about it. The official, who requested anonymity, said Austin may have told them in a misguided display of loyalty.

On Saturday, Austin was killed when a man walked up to a porch on Buckingham Street and shot him, two other men and a 3-year-old girl, all of whom died. Investigators said it was an execution.

Police believe that someone in the Best Friends ordered or carried out the execution, but no one has been arrested.

In the brutal world of Detroit dope gangs, Best Friends has a special niche.

Commander Joel Gilliam, former head of the Detroit police narcotics section, described it as "particularly vicious" during testimony at police Chief William Hart's federal corruption trial. Best Friends came up during questioning about use of money for undercover operations.

Investigators believe that the gang, reportedly built around a core of four Brown brothers, their relatives and friends, initially muscled and shot their way into east side narcotics trafficking in the 1980s. Rather than dealers, Best Friends were known first as enforcers and debt collectors for distributors.

Cmdr. Rudy Thomas, current head of narcotics, testified that Best Friends was responsible for 80 to 100 killings. "They dealt very firmly with those who got in their way," he said in Hart's trial.

Best Friends -- with Terrance and Reginald Brown as two of the top men -- was closely allied with imprisoned drug lord Richard (White Boy Rick) Wershe and Richard (Maserati Rick) Carter, a dealer who was shot to death in a Detroit hospital bed.

However, investigators and others who followed their careers said those partnerships did not stop them from going after Wershe's and Carter's friends if business called for it.

Terrance Brown was acquitted in the 1989 slaying of a rival outside the St. Regis hotel in the New Center area.

Reginald Brown was convicted of murder in 1989, but Recorder's Court Judge George Crockett III ordered a new trial this year and freed Brown on bond in February. The Michigan Court of Appeals revoked Brown's bond in March, but he is still at large.

Memo: SEE ALSO METRO EDITION, Page 2B

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 2B

Index Terms: DETROIT ; DRUG ; SHOOTING ; DEATH ; GANG ; AGE ; ALFRED AUSTIN

Record Number: 9201180376

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