

15-YEAR-OLD'S INNOCENT REQUEST BRINGS TRAGEDY - TRIAL OPENS IN SHOOTING DEATH OF DETROIT GIRL

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Cherrel Thomas wasn't ready to go home, so she asked her cousin if she could ride with her a while longer.

The 15-year-old couldn't have known that minutes later such a simple **request** would lead to her death caused when an assault rifle bullet pierced the trunk of the car, striking her in the back of the neck, prosecutors said Wednesday during the trial of the man accused of the Detroit girl's murder.

During opening statements Wednesday, Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Michael Wagner called Cherrel's April 30 death senseless. He said her death was the result of the easy accessibility to guns, and paranoia.

Two Detroit men, Terrill Johnson, 17, and Jesse Freeman, 21, were charged in connection with Cherrel's death. Johnson, who police say pulled the trigger, was charged with first-degree murder and felony firearm, in which a gun is used to commit a felony.

Freeman was charged with felony firearm and accessory after the fact. On Wednesday, Freeman pleaded guilty to his charges, and will be sentenced Oct. 9. Johnson opted to face a jury trial.

During the first day of testimony, Cherrel's cousin, Lakeita Alexander, 24, testified that she and Cherrel were driving with a friend on the city's west side on April 30. The group had stopped by Johnson's sister's house because the woman had some clothing that belonged to Alexander and her friend. Johnson said his sister wasn't home but would be back, Alexander testified Wednesday.

So Alexander said she then drove about a block away, to a store at the corner of Northlawn and Stawell. While she waited for a friend who was inside the store, Alexander said Johnson approached her car and asked her to roll down the window. She said no. He then told her he would give her one more chance to roll down the window, she testified.

That's when Alexander recalls Cherrel saying that Johnson had a gun. Alexander told the jury she got scared and drove away as Johnson raised the gun and fired. She said she remembers Cherrel telling her she was shot and starting to pray loudly.

Still, Johnson's defense attorney, Richard Glanda, said during opening statements that witnesses will testify that a man was in the backseat of the car, and pointed a gun at Johnson.

"If anything, he was acting in self-defense, but certainly there was no intent to kill," Glanda told the jury.

Testimony continues today in Judge Patricia Fresard's courtroom.

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