

TRIAL TO FOCUS ON KILLER'S IDENTITY , WITNESSES STORY

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It was snowing, the temperature well below freezing, as Thomas and Sharron Randolph made their way through the parking lot of the Empress Gardens Chinese restaurant in Southfield.

Out of the darkness came a man with a gun.

The man's **identity** is at the center of a murder **trial** playing out in Oakland County Circuit Court.

Was it a stranger, as Thomas Randolph insists, a robber with a thick Middle Eastern accent and an itchy trigger finger who would take the couple's money, then shoot Sharron Randolph twice in the skull?

Or was it Sanirell Shannon, hired by Thomas Randolph **to** kill his wife, ending an unhappy marriage with the added benefit of a hefty life insurance policy?

Jurors heard opening arguments Thursday in the **trial** of the two men, charged with first-degree murder in Sharron Randolph's 1982 death.

Central **to** the prosecutor's case are two key **witnesses** , Shannon's niece Sarah Norwood and nephew David Hutsell. The two claim they knew their uncle had committed the murder -- Hutsell says he witnessed the murder -- but kept the information **to** themselves for almost two decades. They went **to** police with the information in December 1999.

Assistant Prosecutor Steve Vitale plans **to** rely heavily **on** their accounts. He told jurors Hutsell drove his uncle **to** the Harvard Row shopping center that night, and sat in the car and watched as Shannon ambushed Sharron Randolph as she left the restaurant with her husband. Hutsell said Shannon then forced him at gunpoint **to** drive **to** the Shannon family home **on** Ohio Street in Detroit. There, Sarah Norwood is expected **to** testify, Shannon stormed through the house, washed in the bathroom, then threw his bloody clothes in a large trash bag.

But defense attorneys say the two told several different **stories** , and vary greatly **on** important details. For one, they've given police three conflicting accounts of how the gun was disposed of, insisting at various times that it was tossed in a river in Wyandotte, the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair.

"These are fantastical **stories** ," Randolph's defense attorney, William Mitchell, told jurors during opening statements.

Shannon's attorney, Terry Price, told jurors the two concocted the **story** against their uncle after a bitter probate fight over their grandmother's estate. Thomas Randolph, an attorney, represented Shannon in that action.

"They didn't like Mr. Randolph, and they don't like their uncle," Price said.

The **trial** is expected **to** last at least three weeks.

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