

BRIDGE DEATH TRIAL TO OPEN BELLE ISLE CASE MAY EXAMINE STATES OF MIND

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Saturday, April 13, 1996

Author: ILAINA JONAS Free Press Staff Writer

Deletha Word had plans to be independent. Four months away from graduating from business school, the 33-year-old single mother was excited about her future.

After trying her hand at other careers, she was hoping to open her own clothing shop after her December 1995 graduation from the Detroit College of Business, according to her family.

Martell Welch Jr. also had plans. He was determined to avoid the road leading to the violence and crime that he saw during his 19 years, according to an essay he wrote last summer for an English class at Wayne County Community College.

But his plans -- and **Word's** -- ended three weeks after that essay was written, when he allegedly beat **Word** so viciously she jumped to her death off the Belle Isle bridge.

The case -- which made international news because initial reports of the incident inaccurately said onlookers cheered the beating -- goes to trial Monday morning in Recorder's Court. Welch is charged with murder. First-degree murder carries a mandatory sentence of life in prison; second-degree murder is punishable by any number of years up to life.

The incident happened around 2 a.m. Aug. 19, after **Word** apparently sideswiped Welch's car on Belle Isle and drove away. Welch forced her car to stop on the bridge, ripped off her clothing, and brutally beat her, according to witnesses. Welch's friends tried to pull him away from her, witnesses say.

Witnesses said they were afraid to intervene because of Welch's size: 6 feet 1 and 290 pounds. **Word** was 4 feet 1 and 115 pounds.

They said she jumped off the bridge when she saw him coming at her with a car jack, swam about 50 feet away from rescuers who jumped in to help her, and drowned.

Assistant Wayne County Prosecutor Kevin Simowski is expected to call almost 30 witnesses, including four of Welch's friends who were with him that night. Three have been granted immunity in exchange for their testimony. Simowski said they are expected to shed more light on events leading up to the beating, including what they were doing on Belle Isle that night and remarks Welch allegedly made after the incident.

Welch had a job and no criminal record. He had written about violence in his paper for an English course.

Violence "obviously was apparent within the context of his environment," said his teacher, Steve Chennault. "Not that he had been involved in anything. He was certainly aware of it and was attempting to stay away from it, avoid a misunderstanding. He talked about a cousin or a friend who had problems with the law. It was something about staying on track."

Welch had been working as a housekeeping aide at Mercy Hospital, which would have taken him back had he made bail, according to the hospital. Welch is being held in lieu of \$1- million bond in the Wayne County Jail.

The states of mind of both **Word** and Welch are expected to be issues in the trial.

A medical examiner's report showed **Word** had PCP (phencyclidine), a hallucinogen, in her body.

Defense attorney Wanda Cal said **Word**'s state of mind will be crucial in the case. Court records indicate Cal will call experts to testify how PCP could have affected **Word**'s judgment. At Welch's preliminary exam, Cal argued that **Word** died because she swam away from her rescuers, not because of the beating.

But prosecutor Simowski said **Word**'s state of mind is irrelevant. His case will focus only on Welch's actions.

Word's father, Walter **Word** , said he believes the trial will show his daughter didn't intentionally let go of the bridge rail. He said her fingers were broken.

Memo: CORRECTION RAN April 16, 1996

getting it straight

* In some Saturday editions, a Local News article about an incident on the Belle Isle bridge should have said **Deletha Word** was 4 feet 11.

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 9A

Index Terms: TRIAL ; DEATH ; DETROIT

Record Number: 9601120560

Copyright (c) 1996 Detroit Free Press