

KILLING MOTIVE IS MYSTERY - 2 DETROITERS FACE MURDER CHARGES IN TEENAGER'S SHOOTING

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Author: JACK KRESNAK FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Law enforcement officials said Thursday that they know who fired the gunshots into a car Tuesday night in Detroit that killed 15-year-old Cherrel Thomas.

They just can't figure out why.

"I don't know how we got to the point where every source of aggravation turns into a shooting," Wayne County Prosecutor Mike Duggan said Thursday, announcing murder charges against two Detroiters. "Somehow someone got on these guys' nerves and they responded by shooting."

Cherrel, a musician and student at Mackenzie High School, was the fourth girl to die by gunfire in Detroit since Feb. 25.

Terrill Johnson, 17, who had been released March 5 from the W.J. Maxey Training School in Whitmore Lake, was charged with first-degree murder and possession of a firearm during a felony.

Jesse Freeman, 21, was charged with second-degree murder for allegedly handing Johnson the AK47 weapon used to kill Cherrel.

They are to be arraigned today in 36th District Court in Detroit.

Duggan said the incident began when Cherrel and two women went to retrieve a jogging suit apparently taken by a woman living at Johnson's mother's house in the 9000 block of Cloverlawn.

Johnson told the women that the woman they were looking for wasn't there, according to a Detroit police investigator's report. The 23-year-old driver, Cherrel and the other woman left but soon parked nearby waiting for another friend to return from a store.

According to the report, Johnson approached the car and asked the driver to roll down the window, saying he had a gun. When he raised the gun, the woman drove off and Johnson allegedly fired two shots into the back of the car. One hit Cherrel, who was hunkered down in the backseat.

The driver, Cherrel's cousin, told police that Cherrel said she was hit and began praying. The cousin stopped the car and an ambulance took Cherrel to Henry Ford Hospital. She died of a gunshot wound to the back.

One witness told police that Johnson said the people in the car had been watching the house and that he shot at the car because "he didn't want them to shoot up his house," the police report said.

Johnson was 14 in April 1999 when he was arrested for carjacking, auto theft and receiving stolen property, according to juvenile court records. He pleaded guilty to the stolen property charge in September 1999. In October 1999, he was committed to the care of the state Family Independence Agency.

Johnson went into a day treatment program in Detroit and was released to his mother, Clara Johnson.

In January 2000, Johnson and another youth robbed a teenager of his jacket at gunpoint. Johnson fired two shots at the fleeing victim but didn't hit anyone, the records said.

After pleading guilty to assault, Johnson was sent to Maxey in July 2000, for rehabilitation.

The Wayne County Department of Community Justice assumed responsibility for managing Johnson's case in April 2001.

In September 2001, the FIA and the Department of Community Justice asked Juvenile Court Judge James Lacey to release Johnson from the secure facility into a community program in Detroit. Lacey refused, saying the crime involved shooting and Johnson had not been rehabilitated.

In February, the agencies renewed their request. Lacey allowed Johnson's release with the conditions that he enroll in a charter school, be tested for drugs and take anger management classes. Lacey, however, did not order an electronic tether that was requested by the Community Justice Department.

Officials said Freeman has no criminal record.

The funeral will be at 1 p.m. Tuesday at James H. Cole Home for Funerals, 2624 W. Grand Blvd., Detroit. Burial is to be in Mt. Hope Cemetery in Livonia.

Contact JACK KRESNAK at 313-223-4544 or kresnak@freepress.com.

Caption: Photo

Cherrel Thomas, 15, was a student at Mackenzie High School.

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Correction: * An article in Friday's Local News and Oakland sections about the killing of a Detroit girl should have said that although 17-year-old Terrill Johnson was arrested in January 2000 for shooting at a teenager while robbing the youth of his jacket, the charge later was dismissed.

Index Terms: CHILD FATALITY ; SHOOTING ; DETROIT ; CHERREL THOMAS

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