

Hopkins, Hanlon prepare for closing arguments in Hughes case

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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For more than a month jurors in the trial of 23-year-old Renato Hughes Jr. have heard a case filled with intricate details, differing versions of what happened on a December morning in 2005, and horrifying descriptions of a confrontation that ended in two deaths and a young man's serious assault.

They've also heard from Hughes himself about what happened in the Clearlake Park of Shannon Edmonds on Dec. 7, 2005, ending in the deaths of his friends, Christian Foster and Rashad Williams — deaths for which he is being tried.

All of that is expected to culminate this week in District Attorney Jon Hopkins' and defense attorney Stuart Hanlon's closing arguments.

The two men have, between them, nearly seven decades of legal experience. They've been battling each other in the Hughes case since Hanlon took it over in 2006, long before the trial opened last month in Martinez, after having been granted a change of venue.

Both say they expect closing arguments to take place Wednesday. Final evidence is due to be presented in court on Tuesday, when Hanlon is set to call character witnesses to testify on Hughes' behalf.

Hopkins said he expects Contra Costa County Superior Court Judge Barbara Zuniga to give instructions to the all-female jury on Thursday. He added that he hopes a verdict could be returned the following day.

The prosecution has alleged that Hughes, Foster and Williams went to Edmonds' home to steal medical marijuana from him, a provocative act which resulted in Williams and Foster being shot to death.

Hughes, because of his alleged part in the robbery scenario, is being held accountable for his companion's murders under the provocative act law, which says a person can be held accountable for any death that results in the commission of a crime likely to result in a lethal response.

The defense has offered that the three young men — and a fourth, so far unaccounted-for suspect — were buying marijuana from Edmonds, who they allege is a known drug dealer — and the deal went bad, ending in him killing Williams and Foster.

Last week was notable for Hughes himself taking the stand to give his story. Hanlon told Lake County News that, initially, he wasn't in favor of Hughes testifying, but the young San Franciscan wanted to do so. In the end, Hanlon said he was glad Hughes did tell his story in his own words.

Hanlon said young people who are being tried in such serious matters as homicide tend to “fall apart” on the stand.

In Hughes' instance, on the stand last Thursday he had some good moments and some where he had a hard time keeping it together, said Hanlon, who added that he's “almost like a father” to Hughes.

There were questions Hughes “just couldn't answer,” said Hanlon, including where a gun came from that is alleged to have been used in the confrontation.

Perhaps one of the most important parts of Hughes' testimony involved a fourth man — known to him only as “Dre,” and said to be a friend of Williams — who he said was with him, Williams and Foster that night.

“The evidence clearly shows there was a fourth person there,” said Hanlon, describing Dre as skinnier and taller than Hughes' 5-foot, 9-inch frame, and wearing an orange jacket.

Hopkins questioned the account of the fourth man. “This was totally brand new,” he said. “I hadn't heard a word of it. Nobody had.”

He said that the name “Dre” in connection to the case hadn't come up from Williams' grandmother, who lives in Clearlake, or any of the young men in the neighborhood.

“This is somebody who immediately disappeared and was never heard or seen again,” he said.

Hanlon disputes that Hopkins didn't know about it, and said the fourth man has been a factor since early on. “I've known about it since I began the case.”

Hopkins questioned why, if the fourth man was such an important factor, it hadn't been brought up by Hanlon sooner in an attempt to clear Hughes. Hanlon, for his part, said the investigation has yet to find Dre.

For Hopkins, Hughes' testimony proved he had been in the house, a point which he said the defendant and his family had denied early on in the case.

According to Hopkins, Hughes testified he had been slumped down in the back seat of a friend's car outside of Edmonds' house, drowsy from smoking a lot of marijuana, when he heard a crash and went running into the home to see what was going on. It was then that Hughes said he cut his hand on a shattered window, which he said was the reason his blood was found at the scene.

“It's not impossible for it to have happened the way he said,” said Hopkins. “It just defies common sense that it would have.”

Hopkins said he plans to emphasize crucial pieces of physical evidence to disprove Hughes' account in closing arguments this week.

For Hanlon, it was another individual who provided the most intense and important moments of the trial — Edmonds himself.

During his testimony, Hanlon said Edmonds testified to shooting Foster while he was on the ground.

“That, to me, is murder,” said Hanlon.

He said self-defense doesn't allow a person to take such actions, which Hanlon called "vigilante justice." "That's not what the law allows," he said.

Hopkins asserted that Edmonds actually testified that he said it was possible he could have shot someone while they were down, but the situation was so chaotic it was hard for him to know what was going on. "There's no physical evidence, really, that says that he did," Hopkins said.

All of the victims' recollections differ because of the trauma they experienced, said Hopkins.

On the audio from a surveillance camera, which Hopkins played in court, he said Edmonds could be heard screaming. "He said on the stand, 'I lost it,'" Hopkins recounted.

Other notable points in the trial, said Hanlon, included gathering of evidence, including a hammer with Hughes' blood on it that didn't show up when law enforcement initially searched Edmonds' home.

"The question becomes, what is the evidentiary value of my client's blood on that hammer?" Hanlon offered, adding that Hughes' blood was on a lot of things in the house. "I don't know what it means."

He called the police work "totally incompetent," although he added police "did the best they could."

Asked which moment in the trial stood out as critical, Hopkins said he couldn't pick just one. "I think the key is the combination of evidence."

An uncommon case

The case was moved to Contra Costa County after a judge ruled last year that Hughes couldn't get a fair trial in Lake County.

When picking the jury in Lake County, Hopkins said they only had encountered two people in the more than 300 considered for jury service who had a bias based on race.

"We had a whole lot more than that in Contra Costa County," he said, adding that diversity doesn't mean a lack of racial bias.

Hopkins said the jury includes 12 female members, plus four alternates — including two men.

The jury's makeup, Hopkins said, includes two black women, two Asian women — one born in Vietnam and one in South Korea — and one woman who came from Poland.

Hanlon said the case is a complex one which has been "grueling emotionally" for him because of its huge implications — namely, that a guilty verdict means Hughes is headed to prison, possibly for life.

He called the case against Hughes "outrageous" — "given who Edmonds is."

"What it all means the jury will have to figure out," he said.

The results of the confrontation at Edmonds' home two and a half years ago already have been devastating, he said, with Edmonds' family destroyed and his girlfriend's son left with a permanent brain injury from being hit in the head.

Hughes' life has been torn apart and "two wonderful families" — those of Williams and Foster — have two dead sons, Hanlon added.

Hanlon, who has been practicing law for 35 years, said the case is an uncommon one. "I wouldn't have made it this long if this was par for the course."

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