

Man found guilty of second-degree murder, sentenced to 10 years

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HOPEWELL — Joseph Emmanuel Crews was found guilty of second-degree murder and use of a firearm to commit murder and was sentenced to 10 years with no time suspended by a jury trial at Hopewell Circuit Court on Monday.

Crews, 25, was accused of stabbing and shooting 22-year-old Treon Ellis in December 2014. Crews had told four different stories of the incident that occurred, one portraying his actions as a result of self defense. Crews was initially charged with first-degree murder.

Hopewell Commonwealth's Attorney Rick Newman said this was one of the more brutal murders that he had seen in his 33 years of law. According to findings by Virginia medical examiner Dr. Eli Goodman, who was the first witness to testify, Crews stabbed Ellis 17 times in the head and neck and shot him twice. One stab wound partially cut Ellis' jugular. The gun and knife, according to Crews, were thrown in the river near Ettrick and were not recovered.

The gun belonged to Ellis, according to Crews. Sgt. Donnie Reid of the Hopewell Police Department, another witness that testified, interrogated Crews twice and got two different stories from Crews. The first version of the story that Crews told Reid was that he was not at the crime scene, but heard gunshots as he was walking to Dupont Garden. Crews said he ran away from the scene scared.

Reid then informed Crews that he had DNA evidence that Crews was at the scene. According to Reid, Crews changed his story, telling Reid that he heard gunshots and went back to the scene, saw Ellis had been shot and then ran because he didn't want to be involved or have police thinking he was involved. One of the witnesses was Crews' cellmate at Riverside Regional Jail, Marquis Cooke.

Cooke told yet another version of the story that Crews had supposedly told him in jail. According to Cooke, Crews said that Ellis had a large amount of marijuana on him and Crews wanted some of it, but Ellis wouldn't give him any of it. Crews responded to Ellis by saying "well if [you're] not going to give me some, then I'll just take it all." Crews' response then led to him chasing Ellis, which then led to the altercation.

Crews himself took the stand to testify in court, telling a fourth version of the story. According to Crews, he was at his cousin's house when Ellis knocked on the door. Crews and Ellis were acquaintances at the time. Crews left his cousin's house shortly after to walk to Five Forks Fine Food and Ellis wanted to go with him. On the way to Five Forks, Ellis told Crews to go with him to a family member's house where they stayed for 20 minutes. While they were there, Crews got into an altercation with Ellis' family member, which Ellis was fairly upset about. After leaving Ellis' family member's house, they began to walk to another residence where a friend of Ellis lived and stayed there to watch television for about 20 to 25 minutes. At some undetermined point throughout the trips to different residences, Ellis asked Crews to hold onto his gun for him. Crews kept the gun in the front left pocket of his jacket.

After leaving the friend's house around midnight, Crews began walking back to his cousin's house and then told Ellis he was going to call it a night. Crews gave Ellis' gun back to him, but Ellis snatched the gun out of Crews' hands. Crews felt that Ellis was still upset from the altercation that occurred earlier between Crews and Ellis' family member. Crews thought Ellis was going to do something with the gun and told him not to do anything crazy. As Crews walked away from Ellis, he heard the Ellis cock the gun and turned around to find Ellis pointing the gun at his face. Crews took his left hand and grabbed Ellis' wrist and began stabbing Ellis until he dropped the gun. Once the gun was dropped, Crews picked it up and began shooting at Ellis as he was trying to run away. Ellis fell between two houses in the Dupont Apartment Complex and Crews began asking Ellis why he was trying to rob him. When he did not get an answer from Ellis, Crews dragged Ellis' body behind one of the houses. Crews said that he was scared for his life when Ellis started firing. According to Crews, he did not tell police this story because he didn't think police would believe him.

Newman said before closing arguments that Crews "chased a man down like a dog and killed him." During closing arguments, Newman asked for a first-degree murder charge and use of a firearm to commit murder. He said that all homicide is presumed to be second-degree murder, but Crews' case was first-degree because even though Crews may have had a right to defend himself once Ellis

pulled a gun on him - as stated in Crews' testimony - he didn't have a right to chase Ellis, which was said in Cooke's testimony. Newman said it only takes a split second for premeditated murder and that if Crews was as innocent as he claimed, he had no reason to flee the scene.

Matt Stewart, Crews' defense attorney, asked the jury to consider the self-defense instruction and find Crews not guilty of use of a firearm to commit murder. He made the point that Crews was a scared young man staring down the barrel of a gun, reasonably fearing for his life.

"We don't have time to sit back and say 'what's the best, most peaceful way to resolve this,'" said Stewart.

Stewart also said that this case is a great example of heat of passion. He said the difference between malice and heat of passion is different between first-degree murder and manslaughter.

After almost two hours of deliberation, the jury came back out with the guilty convictions of second-degree murder and use of a firearm to commit murder. Before deciding on the length of Crews' sentence, family members from both sides of the court spoke on the witness stand.

Ellis' oldest brother, Antonio Holloway, spoke on behalf of the family saying that Ellis left behind two children; a 7-year-old son and a 2-year-old daughter. At Holloway's son's fifth birthday, his son's wish was to see his uncle, Ellis, at his birthday party. Holloway said the party went quiet and the feeling of the room changed from celebration to sadness over the loss of Ellis. Holloway also mentioned that Ellis' son was having a hard time understanding what happened and that Ellis' mother is going to counseling.

Holloway also mentioned that he thinks the on the actual morning of the incident, Ellis asked his son what he wanted for Christmas. Ellis' son wrote down what he wanted to which Ellis responded "alright, I'll go get it. I'll be back." Holloway said that Ellis never came back. Ellis, according to Holloway, would walk down streets with his children with a stroller for his daughter.

"If anybody was the heart of this family...it was him," he said.

After Holloway spoke on the stand, Judy Crews, the defendant's mother, spoke.

"He's not an angel, but he's a sweet person," she said.

Judy Crews said that she's saddened by what happened, but that Joseph Crews isn't that type of person.

“I know that child right there and I know he didn’t mean to kill that boy,” she said.

As his mother was speaking, Joseph Crews began to cry.

“I see in his eyes that he’s sorry for what happened,” she said.

Jessica Scott, Crews’ youth leader at church, also spoke in support of Crews saying that he was always the quietest, meekest, and sweetest teenager that always kept to himself. She said when she initially heard what happened, she couldn’t believe it was Crews in the picture.

Before deliberations began on the sentencing, Newman asked the jury for the maximum sentence which was 40 years for second-degree murder and three years for use of a firearm to commit murder. Stewart asked for 10 years total, seven for second-degree murder and three for use of a firearm to commit murder. The jury deliberated for about 30 minutes until they came back out with the 10 year sentence for Crews.

“It’s just a situation we’re all trying to get through as a family right now,” Holloway said.

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