

Witness tells of Hollywood's demeanor after kidnapping, killing

MARCI WORMSER, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

May 30, 2009 7:06 AM

The former girlfriend of Jesse James Hollywood testified on Friday that in the days immediately following the disappearance and murder of 15-year-old Nicholas Markowitz in August 2000, she and Mr. Hollywood fled to Palm Springs, Colorado and Las Vegas in a new Lincoln that the defendant had recently purchased from a car dealer.

Michelle Lasher, 28, who received immunity for her testimony against Mr. Hollywood, said she did not know that Nicholas had been kidnapped and murdered when she and her-then boyfriend left town.

After Mr. Hollywood joined her and some of her girlfriends on Aug. 11, 2000, in Palm Springs, where they stayed for several nights before leaving the state, "he was panicked," she said of his demeanor.

"I asked him what was wrong, and he wouldn't tell me what was wrong, and I wasn't gonna push him," Ms. Lasher said.

Mr. Hollywood, 29, is on trial accused of first-degree murder and kidnapping, with special circumstances that could make him eligible for the death penalty in connection with the kidnapping and killing, allegedly over a \$1,200 drug debt owed to him by Nicholas' older half-brother, Ben Markowitz.

Nicholas, who lived in the west San Fernando Valley, was kidnapped on Aug. 6, 2000. He was shot to death on Aug. 9, 2000, in the hillsides west of Santa Barbara, after three days of partying at various sites in Santa Barbara with his captors. His body was found Aug. 13, 2000, in a shallow grave in a hiking area off West Camino Cielo.

Several co-defendants have already been convicted. The shooter, Ryan Hoyt, sits on California's death row at San Quentin State Prison, and Jesse Rugge, who was convicted of kidnapping for ransom or extortion, was sentenced to seven years to life in prison. Graham Pressley, who dug the shallow grave in which Nicholas was buried, was convicted of second-degree murder with the use of a firearm. He is free after serving six years with the California Youth Authority.

Mr. Hollywood, who eluded authorities for five years until being captured in Brazil in 2005, is accused of ordering his friends to kill Nicholas.

According to Ms. Lasher, Mr. Hollywood's "panicky" demeanor in Colorado followed a display of calmness when they joined Casey Sheehan for dinner at Outback Steakhouse in the San Fernando Valley on Aug. 8, 2000. Mr. Sheehan's car was used to transport Nicholas to the shooting site.

According to Ms. Lasher, who described herself as the defendant's on-again, off-again girlfriend at the time, she and Mr. Hollywood went to Mr. Sheehan's house on Aug. 8, which was her 20th birthday. Mr. Hollywood borrowed Mr. Sheehan's car that night and was gone "for about 30-45 minutes" before the trio went to dinner. Mr. Hollywood, she said, told her that he had left to take a shower and get ready for dinner. At the steakhouse, according to Ms. Lasher, Mr. Hollywood told Mr. Sheehan: "The situation has been unwound."

After that, both he and Mr. Sheehan appeared to be calm throughout dinner. On Aug. 10, 2000, Mr. Hollywood bought the Lincoln and then met up with Ms. Lasher and her friends in a Palm Springs hotel the next day, she said. Although he never mentioned Nicholas' murder or kidnapping, he was clearly perturbed about something, she said.

"I knew something was very wrong," she said, "but I didn't know why."

On Aug. 16, 2000, after staying at the Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas with Mr. Hollywood, the pair fled to the Rocky Mountains. Ms. Lasher said she booked a room with Mr. Hollywood at a Colorado hotel,

using a fake address and employer and omitting her last name.

"Is that because you knew he was on the run?" asked Senior Deputy District Attorney Hans Almgren.

"No, I never give out my information," she responded. "It's something I've always been taught."

Ms. Lasher, who lived with Mr. Hollywood in two separate homes in the San Fernando Valley in the late 1990s, said that she, Mr. Hollywood and their friends frequently smoked marijuana and partied together at the two homes. Mr. Hollywood, she said, kept a shotgun in their home in Reseda for protection because they lived in a bad neighborhood. He eventually brought it along when the pair moved to a home in Woodland Hills, she said.

In August 2000, someone broke a window in their Woodland Hills home. She thought it was a gang member, but Mr. Hollywood told her that Ben Markowitz had broken it. In addition, she said, Ben Markowitz had left threatening messages on Mr. Hollywood's answering machine and pager for months.

"There was months and months of threats," she said.

Also that month, one of the couple's two pit bulls, Dublin, was poisoned and died. Although no one witnessed the poisoning, "We came home and our dog was dead," she said.

Around that time, Mr. Hollywood began telling people he wanted to move away. He blamed Ben Markowitz's alleged threats for wanting to move.

Santa Barbara County resident Annie Blackford, 26, a former Woodland Hills resident, testified Friday that in August 2000, Mr. Hollywood told her that he planned to move "because too many people knew where he lived."

Ms. Blackford told prosecutors Friday that she and Mr. Hollywood were having sexual relations in the summer of 2000 and that she and her best friend frequently hung out at Mr. Hollywood's Woodland Hills home. Ms. Blackford was 17 and Mr. Hollywood was 20 at the time.

Ms. Blackford said that while she hung out at Mr. Hollywood's house, she frequently saw drug use and that she also saw several guns in his home.

She also heard Mr. Hollywood mention Ben Markowitz.

"I heard him speak negatively about Ben several times," she said.

At the beginning of the day Friday, co-defense counsel Alex Kessel finished his cross-examination of Emilio Jerrez, who lived at the residence where Mr. Hollywood and his friends allegedly took Nicholas on Aug. 6, 2000, the same day the teenager was abducted from his home in the San Fernando Valley. Mr. Jerrez began his testimony on Wednesday.

Mr. Kessel accused Mr. Jerrez of perjury, after he apparently gave testimony Friday that conflicted with some statements he made at Mr. Ruge's trial. At Mr. Ruge's trial, Mr. Jerrez said he didn't recall whether he saw Nicholas bound and gagged at his home. On Friday, he changed his story, telling Mr. Kessel that he had seen the teenager tied up.

"Are you telling us you committed perjury and you lied?" the attorney asked him.

"For fear of my life, yeah, because I was scared your client was still outstanding," he said.

e-mail: mwormser@newspress.com