

Hollywood Witness Claims Threats At The hands Of Prosecutors

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The Jesse James Hollywood capital murder trial took a sudden twist Monday when the defendant's ex-girlfriend accused prosecutors of threatening to charge her with murder if she testified to what she considered the truth.

Michelle Lasher, 28, was called to the stand Friday by Senior Deputy District Attorney Hans Almgren, who along with Chief Trial Deputy Josh Lynn, is prosecuting Mr. Hollywood. Ms. Lasher, who met Mr. Hollywood in high school, travelled with the defendant from Palm Springs to Colorado after the murder of Nicholas Markowitz on Aug. 9, 2000. According to the witness, she did not know about the killing in Santa Barbara County or his kidnapping from the San Fernando Valley.

Mr. Hollywood is alleged to have orchestrated the chain of events over a \$1,200 drug debt owed to him by the victim's brother Ben Markowitz.

During cross-examination, Ms. Lasher told defense attorney James Blatt that Mr. Almgren and a district attorney's investigator on Friday threatened to charge her with murder if she didn't commit perjury by changing her testimony. She also said Ron Zonen, the deputy district attorney previously assigned to the case, threatened her as well.

Superior Court Judge Brian Hill called a lengthy court recess, and once the public was allowed back in the courtroom, Ms. Lasher was again on the witness stand and telling Mr. Blatt she believed she had been told she would be charged as an accessory to murder.

"I was stunned," the witness said.

Ms. Lasher's attorney, James Gregory, who was in the courtroom Monday, was present at the meeting with Mr. Almgren, but Ms. Lasher said she did not recall him stepping in.

When Mr. Almgren continued his questioning, he turned the attention to last March, when prosecutors interviewed Ms. Lasher. Mr. Almgren asked the witness if she recalled him saying all she had to do was tell the truth during that meeting, but she didn't remember.

Of Mr. Zonen, Ms. Lasher reported he never threatened her face to face, but had instead done so

through different attorneys.

Before Ms. Lasher began her testimony last Friday, she met with Mr. Almgren in order to fill out a use immunity agreement, which would protect her from being prosecuted for what she says under oath as long as she tells the truth.

The witness said she believed Mr. Almgren was informing her that he believed she was refusing to testify. Ms. Lasher said in the courtroom she became confused during the meeting, but she reportedly turned down an opportunity to consult her attorney.

Mr. Almgren questioned whether she recalled his concern that she would lie to the jury and that he went on to explain the penal code for committing perjury.

Judge Hill eventually told Mr. Almgren to move on to a different area of questioning, but Ms. Lasher continued saying she feared she would be prosecuted.

"You are attacking me," the witness said to Mr. Almgren.

Judge Hill then decided to end the day's hearings about 15 minutes early, and when the trial continues today, Mr. Gregory is scheduled to testify concerning what he witnessed during the meeting.

Earlier in the day, before any allegations were made, Mr. Almgren presented the witness with a plane ticket dated Aug. 17, 2000, she reportedly used to get back home from Colorado, leaving an at-large Mr. Hollywood behind. However, as soon as she got home, detectives were waiting for her, and the witness acknowledged she lied to them in order to protect Mr. Hollywood, who she said she still loves.

Mr. Blatt questioned Ms. Lasher about being aware the trial could result in the death penalty for the defendant, and the witness soon buried her face into her hands, sobbing, which she did on and off for the rest of the day.

When law enforcement first contacted the witness upon her return from Colorado, Ms. Lasher testified they told her they planned to shoot Mr. Hollywood on site, and this upset her. Although Ms. Lasher lied to detectives, she later contacted them to tell the truth, according to testimony.

The witness also recalled an argument between Mr. Hollywood and Ryan Hoyt, who is on death row for shooting Nicholas dead. The defendant reportedly asked Mr. Hoyt if he was crazy, and the ordeal, she said, led to a blood vessel bursting in Mr. Hollywood's eye.

The trial started out with 12 jurors and four alternates, but the panel lost one of the latter Monday. Judge Hill dismissed a female alternate after she told the court her family had just experienced a financial hardship.

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