

PROSECUTOR BLASTS SUSPECT'S CLAIM NEW VERSION CALLING KILLING AN ACCIDENT IS RIDICULED AS PLOY

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Memo: SHORTER VERSION RAN IN METRO FINAL
EDITION, PAGE 1B.

Shouting questions during a scathing cross-examination, an assistant prosecutor Tuesday ridiculed murder defendant Thomas Enfield's surprise claim that he killed Priscilla Ricketts by accident.

Assistant Oakland County Prosecutor Paul Walton suggested Enfield made his statement in a last-ditch effort to wriggle out of a first-degree murder conviction.

"You came forward with this claim it was an accident because you know there's a difference between murder and manslaughter sentencing, don't you? This is an attempt to get yourself the least amount of jail time possible," Walton said.

Enfield, 22, told jurors Monday that after two years of denying any role in the purse-snatching and killing of Ricketts he had decided to do the right thing.

He changed his story and testified that he ran over her accidentally after he had grabbed her purse in the parking lot of a Troy supermarket.

He also said his codefendant, John Wilson, 21, had nothing to do with the incident.

But Walton said outside the courtroom Enfield's story was a ploy to convince the jury to convict him of a lesser charge when he realized hopes of acquittal on first-degree felony

murder were fading.

Enfield, who remained composed during the questioning, said that dodging the murder conviction was "not my No. 1 agenda."

Prosecutors allege Wilson drove the truck that ran over Ricketts after Enfield grabbed her purse on March 24, 1997. They needed money to buy heroin.

Ricketts, wife of Standard Federal Bank Chairman Thomas Ricketts, died two days later, and Thomas Ricketts died the following month of abdominal cancer.

Enfield's change of story isn't unusual for murder suspects, said Steve Kaplan, a Macomb County assistant prosecutor who successfully tried Enfield in 1998 in a purse-snatching case. He said new stories usually help prosecutors, who relish the opportunity to cross examine murder suspects who might otherwise not testify.

"Rarely does a jury accept testimony from a murder defendant who changes his story midstream," Kaplan said. Walton said Enfield's attorney, Michael McCarthy, had suggested a plea bargain last week, but it was rejected. McCarthy declined comment.

Wilson's attorney, David Steingold, said he will ask Oakland County Circuit Judge Richard Kuhn to issue a not-guilty verdict for his client in light of the new testimony but acknowledged it is a long shot.

Judges can issue such orders in extraordinary circumstances, but Kuhn is expected to allow jurors to evaluate Enfield's story. The men are being tried at the same time, but by separate juries.

Steingold said Tuesday it is unlikely that Wilson will take the stand.

Walton forced Enfield to recount all the lies that Enfield now claims he told during earlier testimony and police questioning. Walton said he was stunned by Enfield's claim that Wilson never became upset that Enfield might allow Wilson to be convicted by withholding the truth.

"He was a good enough friend not to even ask me," Enfield said.

Attorneys on both sides said Kuhn is likely to instruct jurors that they can choose from a variety of verdicts against both men, including.

First-degree felony murder with a term of mandatory life in prison with no parole.

Second-degree murder with a term of up to life in prison.

Manslaughter, with a term of up to 15 years in prison, plus additional time because each defendant would be considered a habitual offender from previous convictions.

Not guilty.

Additionally, each man is charged with larceny from a person, punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

The trial is to resume Thursday, when testimony is expected to conclude.

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Caption: Thomas Enfield had denied involvement.

Priscilla Ricketts was robbed, killed.

THOMAS ENFIELD; PRISCILLA RICKETTS;

HOMICIDE; COURT; TRIAL
