

Maximum Term Sought in Double Slaying; Men Plead Not Guilty to 10- Count Indictments in Killing of Wilson High Couple

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Author:Neely Tucker

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Prosecutors are seeking the harshest penalty allowed under D.C. law, life in prison without parole, for the alleged killers of Wilson High School students Andre Wallace and Natasha Marsh, government attorneys said yesterday during a D.C. Superior Court hearing.

Carlton Blount, 19, and Jermaine A. Johnson, 25, are charged with ambushing the teenage couple Feb. 8, hours after Blount and Wallace got into a fistfight at a Wilson High basketball game. Blount and Johnson were formally charged yesterday with identical 10-count grand jury indictments, including two counts of first-degree murder.

"We intend to seek the enhanced penalty of life without parole," Margaret Carroll, one of two assistant U.S. attorneys prosecuting the high-profile case, said during an hour-long hearing before Judge Russell F. Canan. Both men pleaded not guilty. They have maintained their innocence since turning themselves in to police the week after the shooting.

Under the legal code used by prosecutors, each defendant must be convicted of both murders for the life-without-parole sentence to be considered by Canan. The killings of Wallace and Marsh, both 17, who were shot to death in front of her mother's house as they unloaded groceries, captured the city's attention with the lingering image of lost youth and what-might-have-been potential. Both were bright students attending one of the city's best public high schools and eagerly planned to attend West Virginia University together this fall.

Instead, they were buried in their graduation gowns, side by side, in matching baby blue caskets. Their funeral drew more than 4,000 mourners and condolences from President Clinton.

Prosecutors say their lives tangled with their alleged killers' in the months before the slayings. Court testimony revealed that Marsh had dated Johnson and that she was friends with Blount.

At a Wilson High vs. Coolidge High basketball game Feb. 8, Blount and Johnson sat a few feet from Wallace. Blount needed the star football player about his girlfriend's relationship with Johnson, and a fight broke out. By all accounts, the muscular Wallace outfought Blount. Almost everyone was ejected from the game. Blount was heard shouting that he was "going to get my hammer." Tia Harris, Johnson's girlfriend and Natasha Marsh's close friend, testified in a preliminary hearing that Blount called her a few minutes after the fight. He and Johnson were trying to locate the couple, he said. She patched him through to Marsh's mother on a three-way conference call.

Madilia "Rena" Marsh-Williams heard only Harris on the line and told her the couple was buying groceries at a nearby store before returning home. Blount used that information, prosecutors charge, shooting Wallace, then Marsh, with a 9mm handgun when they arrived at Marsh-Williams's house in the 3600 block of 17th Street NE.

In court papers filed yesterday, prosecutors said Blount has written letters from the D.C. jail that "discuss" the crime. They now want to use those letters as further evidence against him.

Defense attorneys Nikki Lotze, representing Johnson, and Tamar Meekins, representing Blount, asked the court for more time to prepare for what is likely to be a high-profile, weeks-long trial.

"This is a monumental case and . . . I need more time. My investigation is nowhere near complete," Lotze said.

Canan complied, setting trial for Jan. 4.

Marsh-Williams said she was satisfied that the District's toughest penalty would be sought for her daughter's death. "When you consider all the work [Blount and Johnson] went through to wind up at my front door, the phone calls, going into the Safeway to look for them, then I think it's fitting," she said. "They stalked those babies."

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