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Jury selection in Jupiter murder trial to start

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Mother returns to area for hearing

By Michelle Gentile

Staff writer

JUPITER - For the first time since her son was murdered two years ago, Charla Las Casas is flying back to Jupiter. She wants to be there when attorneys start selecting the jury next week for one of two trials to be held in the murder of her son.

Denny Rowland, 21, died the morning of Feb. 10, 2006, after two men entered their Jupiter home and held her son at gunpoint and held her hostage, according to police reports. Later, her son died



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on the kitchen floor from
 gunshot wounds that hit his
 aorta.



"I was there for his last breath," said Ms. Las Casas. "His ashes will be with me in court where we'll await justice."

The only eyewitness in the killing, Ms. Las Casas will be able to tell what happened that night to the jurors to be picked on April 7.

Testifying in the future trial is also Jessie Sanchez, 21, Mr. Rowland's girlfriend at the time and someone who knew him since middle school. She was on the phone with him during the attack.

"I was on the phone when the shots were happening," said Ms. Sanchez. "Denny told me he'd been shot and to get over to his house."

Jury selection starts next week for the trial of the man responsible for pulling the trigger, Zachary Zeman, 22, who has been charged with first-degree murder with a firearm and burglary with a firearm.

The second trial will be for Rikardo Alvarenga, 22, also charged with first-degree murder and robbery. No date for that trial has been set.

Investigative findings and 405 pages of discovery documents will bring to light the events of that day.

"When he came home, Zach and Ricky ambushed him in the front yard," said Ms. Las Casas. "I don't know why Ricky did this, we befriended him. They (Denny and Ricky) were close. Ricky watched movies with us and ate dinner with us."

Mr. Rowland and Mr. Alvarenga were friends in high school, according to Ms. Las Casas, and a few years out of high school the two had gotten back in touch.

"Ricky was my son's friend who I think set him up with Zachary. The whole reason this took place was because my son was supposed to get paid a large sum of money from a record company," she said. "He hadn't picked up the check yet, but I believe they thought he did."

Mr. Rowland was an aspiring music promoter and songwriter and had an event promotion company called On Target Entertainment.

"He was looking forward to some day becoming a music artist," said Ms. Sanchez. "It was his big goal and he was going to try and make it."

A week prior to the shooting, Mr. Rowland, Mr. Alvarenga and one other person rented a hotel room and put the charges on Mr. Alvarenga's credit card. A third of that amount was approximately \$50.

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"Mr. Alvarenga gave a sworn, taped statement that Zachary Zeman and he went to Rowland's home during the early morning hours to collect a debt of \$140 that Rowland allegedly owed Alvarenga," police reports show. "Mr. Alvarenga stated that Zeman kept the gun on his lap while both men waited outside the Rowlands' home for him to return."

"I was talking to him before it happened," said Ms. Sanchez. "He was walking up to his house when he was confronted by them."

Ms. Las Casas said when she looked outside she saw Mr. Alvarenga and her son, but didn't know who the other guy was.

"The expression on my son's face was pure terror," she said. "Being a mom, you never want to see that look on your child's face."

Ms. Las Casas opened the door to the two men and her son, when Mr. Zeman and Mr. Alvarenga forced their way into the home and made way for Mr. Rowland's bedroom.

Once at the bedroom Ms. Las Casas was forced to put her head down onto the mattress but heard several gunshots. After the shots, both men fled from the home. Ms. Las Casas went to the aid of her son, who died on the kitchen floor, police reports said.

"If I had known, I would have given (the gunman) \$50 out of my pocket," said Ms. Las Casas. "Denny said he would pay him, but I didn't know he would pay with his life."

Just after 3:30 a.m. on Feb. 10, Jupiter Police officers found Mr. Rowland's body lying on the kitchen floor of his mother's home. He was pronounced dead on the scene.

Shortly after the shooting, police received a call that a black pickup truck had dropped off a white male at Jupiter Medical Center's emergency room with a gunshot wound. Authorities later identified the man as Mr. Zeman.

Mr. Alvarenga told investigators he used his stepfather's pickup truck, because he knew no one would recognize the vehicle. He then drove Mr. Zeman to the Jupiter Inlet Waterway where he threw the firearm into the inlet.

"The prosecutor's theory is that he assisted him with the murder and therefore, they are seeking first-degree murder, even though Mr. Zeman did the shooting," said Ron Chapman, the defense attorney for Mr. Alvarenga.

Mr. Zeman is being defended by the public defender.

The defense for Mr. Alvarenga says it will evaluate how Mr. Zeman's trail goes and make adjustments based on that.

"He (Mr. Alvarenga) provided the gun and he set out to use his stepfather's car.

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It seems clear to me," said Ms. Las Casas.

With the home blocked off with yellow tape, detectives and investigators spent three days probing the house and surrounding area for evidence.

"There were over 400 kids who attended the funeral and I was told that over 50 people showed up for the Feb. 10, 2007 anniversary of his death," said Ms. Las Casas. "He was popular and very well liked."

The State Attorney's Office is prosecuting the case beginning April 7. They both have remained in jail since 2006.

"I definitely feel justice will be served and bring more closure to the entire situation," said Ms. Sanchez.

If convicted of the crimes they are charged, both Mr. Zeman and Mr. Alvarenga could serve a maximum of two life sentences.

"I've been waiting for this trial to begin for a long time," said Ms. Las Casas. "I just know that I can't move on (until) this is finished."

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