

New Haven man found not guilty in 2011 slaying

By Randall Beach, New Haven Register

Given a case with no forensic evidence and prosecution witnesses with shady histories, a jury Monday found Larry Johnson not guilty of murder in the 2011 shooting death of Edward Andrew Thompson.

The 12 Superior Court jurors needed just 2½ hours to reach their decision. They also found Johnson, 34, of 121 Pine St., not guilty of carrying a pistol without a permit.

Thompson, 37, was shot in front of dozens of witnesses in the middle of Grand Avenue on Oct. 13, 2011, at about 12:30 a.m. But those witnesses either didn't want to cooperate with police or could not see the shooter because his face was obscured by a hood and it was dark outside.

The witnesses who were subpoenaed by the state had criminal records or were recovering drug addicts.

Defense attorney Norm Pattis noted this during his closing argument Monday morning, as

There's something wrong about hauling people in on flimsy evidence that's the product of police coercion and out-and-out lies.

— Norm Pattis
Attorney for the Defense,
summarizing his view of the state's case against Larry Johnson



Edward Andrew Thompson was killed in New Haven in 2011.

well as “coercive” tactics by police detectives in eliciting statements by two of the witnesses who said they were with Johnson shortly before the shooting.

But Assistant State's Attorney Stacey Miranda, who co-tried the case with State's Attorney Michael Dearington, reminded jurors in her closing argument that those two witnesses said they didn't feel threatened by the police.

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“All of the evidence points to Larry Johnson,” Miranda said. “He had the motive, the means and the opportunity. He was angry about being stabbed, he had been seen with a gun the week before and he had the opportunity to drive back to the location where he’d been stabbed.”

“Unfortunately for the defendant,” she added, “perhaps because he was high on PCP, he got the wrong guy.”

The two witnesses who testified they were with Johnson the night of the stabbing and shooting, said he told them he had been stabbed in a street fight by “a white boy” and he wanted revenge.

The witnesses said Johnson persuaded them to get into a car with him to look for the assailant but that he dropped them off and then continued his quest. When he returned to see them shortly afterward, they testified, Johnson seemed nervous and upset.

The two witnesses said Johnson told them he had shot a white person.

But Pattis noted those witnesses were inconsistent in saying when and where those alleged conversations took place.

“These were two men with lots to gain by putting words in Mr. Johnson’s mouth,” Pattis said, noting they had been arrested on drugs and weapons charges.

Pattis cited the police statement in which the two were told by

Detective Bertram Ettienne, “I can help you” and “you can help yourself.”

Pattis asserted the two witnesses had “cooked up” a story to help themselves.

Summarizing his view of the state’s case against Johnson, Pattis said, “There’s something wrong about hauling people in on flimsy evidence that’s the product of police coercion and out-and-out lies.”

But Miranda told the jury the “cooked up” theory made no sense. “Why? Why would they implicate this defendant out of nowhere?”

She noted the two provided “a lot of specific details” about their ride in the car that night with Johnson, including where each of them sat in the car.

“It’s all in the details,” Miranda said.

She also cited a detail by one of those two witnesses that Johnson spotted a white man wearing “a gray sweater or something” as they were riding around and that Johnson thought this was the person who had stabbed him. Miranda noted Thompson was wearing a gray jacket that night.

But Pattis might have planted the seeds of reasonable doubt in jurors’ minds when he asked, “Who had the motive to kill?” He cited a witness’ testimony she heard a man at the crime scene say, “Shane, why you do that?”

Pattis also noted testimony by a witness who conceded Thompson had owed him about \$500 in drug money. “If you’re a drug dealer, you’ve got a reputation to maintain on the street,” Pattis said. “You’re gonna do what you’ve gotta do.”

Pattis cited testimony by another witness that a man had approached her in a bar and told her he had killed Thompson because of the drug debt.

However, Miranda said it was implausible the man would kill Thompson for owing \$500.

“There’s no evidence pointing to either the mysterious ‘Shane’ or the man who was owed the drug money, Miranda said.

As for the allegation of police pressure on the two witnesses, Miranda said, “They were reminded they were facing a lot of time in jail and that it would be in their best interests to cooperate. How are police supposed to get information from people?”

When he gave the jurors legal instructions, Superior Court Judge Brian T. Fischer said they could consider third party culpability. Thus, if they reasonably believed “Shane” and/or the witness who was owed the \$500 might have been responsible for the crime, they should acquit Johnson.

The jurors began deliberating at 2:15 p.m. and announced their decision shortly after 4:45 p.m.

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Johnson, dressed in a black suit, dropped his head in relief when he heard the jury forewoman twice say “not guilty.” Thompson’s mother, Lois Engelhardt, was silent in the courtroom.

After adjournment, Engelhardt declined to comment. In the hallway, Pattis hugged the mother of the murder victim.

Dearington merely said, “The jury has spoken.”

Pattis later said, “This was a team effort,” including work by co-defense attorneys Jim Nugent and Brittany Paz. “We are grateful to the jury. It took a courageous jury to reach this verdict.”

But Johnson was not released from custody. He still faces narcotics charges and other counts, including assault and interfering with an officer. ■