Defendant: Amanda Hayes

Victim(s): Laura Ackerson

Court Decision: Amanda Hayes was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 13 to 16.5 years in prison for the death of Laura Ackerson in July 2011​.

Case Facts:

Laura Jean Ackerson (the victim) and Grant Ruffin Hayes (defendant) met in March 2007. Thereafter, the two engaged in a domestic relationship, but never married. Two children were born of the relationship, and once defendant and the victim separated, a custody dispute over the children ensued. In late 2009, defendant met Amanda Hayes (Amanda) and they began dating. Defendant and Amanda married in April 2010 and moved into an apartment in Raleigh. The victim lived in Kinston.

On 29 June 2010, the Lenoir County District Court entered a consent order giving temporary physical custody of the children to defendant during the week and to the victim on weekends. As part of their temporary arrangement, the parties agreed to a psychological evaluation by Dr. Ginger Calloway, a forensic psychologist. After evaluating the parties over a period of time, Dr. Calloway issued a report recommending that defendant and the victim share legal and physical custody of the children. Over defendant's objection, Dr. Calloway testified about the contents of her report at trial.

On 12 July 2011, defendant e-mailed the victim to suggest that she see the children for a mid-week visit. The victim drove to Raleigh on 13 July, texting defendant at 4:12 p.m., “I'm leaving the Wilson area now. I'll call when I get past the traffic. Where will you be in [an] hour or so?” The victim also called defendant, with the last outgoing call occurring at 4:59 p.m. near Crabtree Valley mall “going outbound toward [defendant's] apartment[.]” Chevon Mathes, the victim's friend and business partner, knew that the victim was going to Raleigh and expected a business related call from her at approximately 9:00 p.m., which she never received.

In the early hours of 14 July, defendant bought goggles, trash bags, a reciprocating saw, blades, plastic sheeting, tarp, gloves, bleach, tape, and a lint roller at Wal–Mart and Target in Raleigh. Amanda called her daughter, Sha, later that morning, and Sha took the children to Monkey Joe's, a play center, in Raleigh for most of the day. On 16 July, defendant bought coolers and ice. He also rented a U–Haul trailer and indicated that his destination was Texas. Amanda called Sha and told her that she was going to Texas to see her sister, Karen Berry. Defendant, Amanda, and the children drove to Texas in the U–Haul and arrived at Ms. Berry's house in the late hours of 17 July or early in the morning of 18 July.

On 19 July, defendant bought gloves and bottles of acid from Home Depot. Surveillance cameras captured Amanda dumping some of the bottles in an area near Ms. Berry's residence. Ms. Berry's residence was also located near a creek that was often used for fishing. Ms. Berry testified that defendant and Amanda took her boat into the creek on the night of 19 July. When investigators later searched the creek, they found the victim's decomposed and dismembered body parts. The State's expert witness pathologists testified at trial that the victim's cause of death was “homicide by und[et]ermined means” or “undetermined homicidal violence.”

Defendant returned the U–Haul trailer on 20 July and drove with Amanda and the children back to Raleigh. Mathes became concerned about the victim's disappearance and notified law enforcement. After launching an investigation, law enforcement officers searched defendant's apartment on 20 July. In addition to a bleach stain, missing furniture, and cleaning products, they also found lyrics to a song entitled, “Man Killer.” The lyrics concerned the first-person killing of a woman by making her bleed and by strangulation. Over defendant's objection at trial, the trial court admitted the song lyrics into evidence.

The State also offered the witness testimony of Pablo Trinidad at trial. Trinidad testified that in July 2011, he was being held in the Wake County Detention Center on federal charges while defendant was being held in the same location for the murder charge. Trinidad stated that he met defendant because they were housed in the same area. One day, inmates saw defendant's case being discussed on television and wanted to harm him, but Trinidad diffused the situation. Trinidad testified that at some point after this incident, defendant told him that he called the victim and “lured” her to his apartment under the “false pretenses” of settling the custody dispute, “subdued” her with Amanda's help, strangled her, and drove out of state to dispose of the body.