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CABBIE HOMICIDE CASE DUE FOR JURY

By MELISSA GRACE Staff writer August 14, 1999 Publication: Times Union, The (Albany, NY) Page: B4 Word Count: 378

A witness for the defense testified Friday that the former girlfriend of alleged cabbie killer Kristian Hansen confessed that she -- and not Hansen -- was the murderer. Francine Vero, 18, said Melissa Davis, a former co-defendant of Hansen in the Aug. 1, 1996, shooting death of Santa ``Sammy'' Cassaro, telephoned her the day of the murder.

``She said she killed a taxi driver," Vero said under questioning by Hansen's defense attorney Michael P. Mansion.

To drive his point home, the attorney asked if Davis had said Hansen killed the driver: ``No, she said `I killed a taxi driver,' " Vero repeated.

The jury of 11 women and one man will get the first-degree murder case against Hansen, 23, formerly of Castleton, after closing arguments set for Monday.

Hansen faces a maximum prison term of life without parole if convicted of the 3 a.m. attack.

Vero took the witness stand on the last day of testimony in a five-day trial before County Judge Larry J. Rosen.

Three scenarios of murder have emerged during the trial.

One version of events presented by Assistant District Attorney Paul A. Clyne alleges that Hansen killed Cassaro intentionally. The second is Hansen's original defense, as outlined in an alleged statement he gave police the day after the murder. In it, Hansen confesses to shooting Cassaro but claims the gun went off by accident when the cabbie suddenly raised his arm, knocking Hansen and the gun. The third, offered by the defense, is that Davis actually did the shooting.

To prove his case, Clyne called police who took Hansen's alleged confession and ballistics experts who testified that the gun could not have gone off by accident.

The prosecution's star witness, though, was Davis, who was 15 at the time of the shooting. Davis testified that Hansen was carrying a .25-caliber Larcin pistol she stole from her mother. She said they summoned a cab that night intending to rob the driver to pay off a \$300 drug debt. Davis also told the jury that before Hansen climbed in the back seat and she the front, Hansen said: ``I'm going to shoot him; you take his wallet."

Davis said Hansen got in the cab and almost immediately fired a shot into the back of Cassaro's head. She testified against him as part of a plea bargain.

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