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Teen's Murder Trial Begins

By Scott E. Williams
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TEXAS CITY — Family members packed the 122nd State District Court in Galveston on Wednesday to hear prosecutors describe the savage beating that killed an elderly couple on Feb. 11, 2004.

More than two dozen sat behind the defense table where Thomas Justin Thomas sat, while prosecutor Stacey Jones accused him of beating his grandparents, William and Lorena Pearl Clement, to death with a tire iron.

Jones detailed a plot hatched by Thomas, 19, and three other teens to burglarize his grandparents' home in the 1200 block of Third Avenue South.

She said that shortly after midnight, William Clement came downstairs after hearing Thomas kick in the back door. When Clement reached the kitchen, Jones said he saw the grandson who had spent a great deal of time in their home. This visit was different, she said.

"He wasn't met with hugs or kisses," she told jurors in her opening statement. "He was met with a tire iron."

Jones said Thomas left the house after beating both grandparents to death and went to the van containing his associates. It was parked in the alley behind the house.

As they pulled onto a nearby street, they were spotted by police officers in what proved to be a grisly coincidence. Minutes earlier, police had received a call that a suspect in a stabbing at the Texas City Dike was in a van resembling the one pulling onto 12th Street South. Officers stopped the van and found the tire iron, as well as a woman's purse, a man's wallet and a rifle.

While police made their discovery, Thomas' mother, the victims' daughter, was making a discovery of her own. Officers still had the four van occupants detained when a call came over the radio that a woman had discovered her parents, beaten and bloody, in their burglarized home less than a block away.

Defense attorney Tad A. Nelson declined to give an opening statement. Under state law, defense attorneys can opt to give their statement at the conclusion of the prosecution's case and before defense evidence begins.

However, while cross-examining Wayne Clement, Thomas' uncle and the victims' son, Nelson asked about the closeness of the relationship between the teen and the couple.

Nelson, who frequently objected to Jones making arguments in her opening statement, also established that Thomas was "not so bright a kid."

Because prosecutors are not seeking the death penalty, a guilty verdict in this case would mean an automatic life sentence for Thomas.

Daniel Robert Northrup, 17; Eric Lee Kilman, 19; and Christine Marie Cox, 19; also face capital murder charges in the case. Thomas is the first to go to trial.