

Florida boot camp death trial starts

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Prosecutor Pam Bondi, blonde hair, confers in court with Gina Jones, right, mother of Martin Lee Anderson, 14, Wednesday, Oct. 3, 2007, in Panama City, Fla., where seven former juvenile boot camp guards and a nurse are on trial for the teen's death in January 2006. (AP Photo/Robert Cooper, Pool)

By **Melissa Nelson, Associated Press Writer**

PANAMA CITY, Fla. — The trial of seven former juvenile boot camp guards and a nurse charged with killing a teenager focused Wednesday on whether he died from a genetic blood disorder or was suffocated by the drill instructors.

In opening statements, prosecutors said Martin Lee Anderson, 14, died because the guards repeatedly hit and kicked him, then broke ammonia tablets and covered his nose, forcing him to inhale the fumes during the 30-minute videotaped encounter.

"The guards repeatedly struck him when his medical safety should have been their primary concern," prosecutor Pam Bondi said, later adding: "This was no accident. This was a child who was killed."

Defense attorneys said the surveillance video shows their clients restraining Anderson through standard camp procedures designed to protect him, other juveniles and camp employees. They claimed that Anderson was resisting them after becoming lethargic during a physical fitness test.

He died a day later after being taken to a hospital from the boot camp, which was run by the county sheriff's office.

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The defense said Anderson died because he had undiagnosed sickle cell trait, a genetic blood disorder. There has been research -- some involving recruits at military boot camps -- linking the trait to sudden death after extreme exertion.

"This case didn't start on Jan. 5, 2006, it started Jan. 15, 1991, when Martin Lee Anderson was born with sickle cell trait," said Robert Sombathy, attorney for guard Patrick Garrett.

Defense attorneys told jurors they would present experts who would testify there was little the guards and the nurse could have done to help Anderson without knowledge of his undiagnosed condition.

"Martin Lee Anderson died because he had complications of sickle cell trait. ... It can happen with a great deal of exercise or with a small amount of exercise. When it happens, if it is not checked almost immediately, it almost always results in death," said James White Jr., the attorney for guard Raymond Hauck.

An initial autopsy by the local medical examiner said the death was due to natural complications of the disorder. But a special prosecutor ordered a second autopsy by another doctor, who found the guards suffocated Anderson with their hands over his mouth and nose and by making him breathe ammonia.

Dr. Jeff Appel, a medical emergency room physician who treated Anderson, testified the boy was "extremely ill" when he reached the hospital.

"His cells obviously were not getting enough oxygen for some reason," he said.

Appel said he did not diagnose sickle cell trait as the causes of Anderson's distress. He ordered Anderson be sent by helicopter for treatment at a specialized pediatric unit in Pensacola, where the boy died after he was taken off life support early the next morning.

Anderson's parents watched intently during court, looking pained at times. His mother, Gina Jones, told Court TV that she prayed for strength to deal with the defense's attacks on her son's background.

He was sent to the camp for a probation violation after trespassing at a school and stealing his grandmother's car from a church parking lot.

The case has generated intense local and national media attention, and civil rights groups doubt a mostly white jury will be impartial. Anderson was black; the guards are white, black and Asian. The guards and nurse face up to 30 years in prison each if convicted of aggravated manslaughter of a child.

About 30 protesters had gathered outside the court, which is across the street from the now-closed camp. The NAACP's Florida chapter demonstrated against the trial because five of the six jurors are white (the other is Asian) and the trial was not moved from Bay County in the Florida Panhandle. Some of the seated jurors had seen the videotape.

Benjamin Crump, the attorney who represented Anderson's family in a lawsuit against the state, told protesters that the defense was focusing on sickle cell trait because attorneys were "looking for any excuse to justify what happened on the tape."

After an outcry from Anderson's family and the public last year over the death investigation, then-Gov. Jeb Bush appointed Hillsborough County State Attorney Mark Ober as a special prosecutor to avoid a conflict of interest for local law enforcement.

The Florida Legislature dismantled the state's system of youth boot camps after Anderson's death. The case also led to the resignation of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's chief and public protests at the state Capitol.

The Legislature agreed to pay Anderson's family \$5 million earlier this year to settle civil claims.

(This version CORRECTS that boy was forced to inhale ammonia fumes.)

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ME reiterates boot camp autopsy findings

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Gina Jones, mother of Martin Lee Anderson enters the courtroom Wednesday, Oct. 10, 2007, for the manslaughter trial of seven boot camp guards and a nurse in Panama City, Fla. (AP Photo/Robert Cooper, Pool)

By **Melissa Nelson, Associated Press Writer**

PANAMA CITY, Fla. — The medical examiner who performed the first autopsy on a 14-year-old boy who died after an altercation with boot camp guards told jurors Wednesday that he found no signs of serious injury on the teenager's body.

Video of guards hitting and kneeling Martin Lee Anderson a day before his death drew outrage, especially in light of Dr. Charles Siebert's conclusion that the teen died of complications from a previously undiagnosed blood disorder. Siebert repeated those findings Wednesday and said that although it seemed "counterintuitive," the strikes were actually arousing Anderson and "probably keeping him alive."

Siebert, who examined Anderson's body the day he died, testified in the manslaughter trial of the seven guards and a nurse of the now-closed camp.

He said the cause of death was internal hemorrhaging brought on by sickle cell trait, which can hinder cells carrying oxygen during physical

stress.

Prosecutors say the guards suffocated Anderson by covering his mouth and making him inhale ammonia; a second autopsy by another doctor supports that argument. Prosecutors also say guards failed to respond to the boy's medical distress.

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But defense attorneys contend that sickle cell trait was the cause of death and that their clients followed policy in trying to control a juvenile offender.

Defense attorneys rested their case late Wednesday following Siebert's testimony and that of a sickle cell expert. Closing arguments were to begin Thursday morning.

Anderson was "beyond the point of return" when he collapsed on the exercise field while running laps, Siebert said.

Defense attorney Robert Sombathy asked Siebert whether "knee strikes, arm-bar takedowns, pressure points, ammonia capsules or yelling in loud voices" led to Anderson's death. He said no.

Two medical experts, including one who performed the second autopsy after Anderson's body was exhumed as part of the investigation, testified earlier in the trial that they believed the guards' actions did contribute to Anderson's death.

One doctor said Anderson died from a combination of sickle cell trait and a lack of oxygen caused by the guards. A second doctor said the guards' hands over Anderson's mouth, depriving him of oxygen, would have killed him without the underlying sickle cell trait.

Siebert's initial finding that Anderson died solely of sickle trait led to a widespread public outcry and was among the issues that prompted the governor to appoint a special prosecutor, who ordered the second autopsy.

"My career and my reputation in this state, it's already over," Siebert said. He testified later that the prosecutors in the trial were among those who pressured him to change his findings.

Earlier Wednesday, Guard Joseph Walsh II testified that he noticed Anderson on the boy's first day at the camp because he used profanity.

"There is no profanity at the boot camp," Walsh said. "They are instructed not to speak without permission to speak."

That began a chain of events that ended when Anderson was carried off by paramedics on a stretcher, Walsh said. Anderson died at a hospital.

Walsh detailed how he used pressure points behind Anderson's ear and made him inhale ammonia to get his attention. He said he used hammer strikes on the boy's arms to get him to unclench his fists.

When Anderson's body went limp, Walsh said, he suspected Anderson of feigning illness because that tactic was common among the youths in the camp.

Walsh also said he threw the ammonia capsules he used on Anderson over the camp fence because they had the teen's saliva on them and he didn't want to put them in his pocket.

Guard Henry Dickens testified that he used his hand to hold a pressure point on the nerve behind the ear of a limp Anderson.

"If I had seen anything wrong out there I would have put an end to it," Dickens said. "Everything we were doing out there, we were doing things we were trained to do."

Also Wednesday, Circuit Judge Michael Overstreet ordered the boy's father, Robert Anderson, to leave the courtroom after he supposedly made noises. He said Anderson could continue watching the trial on a video feed in another room.

The judge said Anderson and others made noises throughout the trial, which started last week. Anderson's family sat in the front of the courtroom; the noises Overstreet complained of were not heard by reporters in the back.

During the lunch break, Anderson said he did not make any noises in court and blamed the disruption on a text message he said defense attorneys sent to someone seated near him.

The boy's mother earlier left the courtroom in tears as a videotape of the guards overpowering the teen played and a defendant described how he hit the boy while he was limp on the ground.

"I cannot take it," Gina Jones sobbed before leaving.

The guards and nurse face as many as 30 years in prison if convicted of manslaughter.

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