

The Sun

**Man accused in Howard rape says he was buying cocaine
Defendant testifies that rings were traded for drug**

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February 1, 1997 Page(s): 3B

Edition: FINAL

Section: METRO

Length: 634 words

Index Terms:

MARYLAND

Record Number: BSUN495250

Testifying in his defense yesterday, Timothy Chase told a jury in Carroll County Circuit Court that he was out buying crack cocaine on the night he is alleged to have raped a 15-year-old Columbia girl behind Howard County's central library.

With his testimony, Chase sought to explain some of the state's strongest evidence against him -- two gold rings worn by the victim the night of the rape that police testified they found in Chase's pockets.

Chase, who admitted that he is a convicted armed robber and drug dealer, told the jurors he was buying crack with money earned in part from ironing his step-mother's nurse uniform.

Walking to his west Columbia home off Cedar Lane that night he ran into a friend that he identified as Winnie Anderson. Chase testified Anderson offered him \$20 and two gold rings for half the crack Chase had just purchased for \$100.

"I told him I'd take {the deal}," said Chase, answering questions from his lawyer, assistant public defender W. Samuel Truette. Chase looked directly at the jurors as he spoke, exhibiting little anxiety in the hushed courtroom.

Cross-examining Chase, Assistant State's Attorney Janine L. Rice asked him if he had ever requested that Anderson testify about the crack-for-rings sale. Chase, 29, said he had not.

"Do you expect this jury to believe your story even though you've been convicted of robbery with a deadly weapon two occasions," Rice asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Chase responded.

The victim identified the rings in her testimony. She told jurors that last March 20 she and her 7-year-old sister were abducted in front of the library in Columbia and forced into nearby woods. There, she testified she was raped while her sister lay next to her. Afterward, the rapist stole her jewelry, the girl testified.

Chase also testified that he had foot surgery in January 1996 and said he still walked with a limp in March. Neither victim said that their assailant had a limp.

Chase's testimony as the final defense witness provide a dramatic finale to the four-day trial in a case that made many question the safety of Columbia.

The jury is expected to begin deliberations today after closing arguments.

Prosecutors have presented evidence that DNA tests done on semen stains found on the victim's sweater revealed patterns that occur in only one of every 9,000 African-American males -- including Chase.

The prosecution rested earlier yesterday with testimony from a police officer about finding the rings in Chase's pocket. Chase's wife -- who provided evidence that led to his arrest -- was called to the stand and told Howard circuit Judge Diane O. Leasure that she would not testify against her husband of about two years.

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Truette's first defense witnesses were crime technicians, who said Chase's fingerprints were not found in the victim's book bag or at the crime scene. Truette also called Howard County police officials to try to paint the picture of a Police Department eager to make an arrest.

Jurors remain sequestered -- with more light shed on the possible reason for the judge's action Thursday. Jail officials said yesterday Chase told the court that the copious notes he had taken during the trial were missing after a search of his jail unit after an inmate collapsed. The inmate later died, apparently of cardiac arrest. The notes were not found.

There was speculation that if the notes became public, media coverage might prejudice the jury.

Pub Date: 2/01/97

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