

The Sun

Trial starts in shooting case; Wrong man arrested in Harper's Choice, defense attorney says; Disabled veteran wounded

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An attorney for an 18-year-old man charged with attempted murder in one of two shootings that stunned Harper's Choice in September said yesterday that the state arrested the wrong man.

In opening statements, the prosecution said Robert Joseph Manning fired a sawed-off shotgun and seriously wounded John Gordon Jackson, 38, just before 2 a.m. Sept. 21 near Jackson's apartment on Harpers Farm Road. Defense attorney Richard Bernhardt said another man was the shooter.

Jackson, a disabled Army veteran, was shot about 24 hours after a 17-year-old boy was robbed and shot in the abdomen a block and a half away. Another defendant is scheduled to go on trial in that case.

Judge Diane Leasure is presiding over the case in Courtroom 3, where family members of Manning and Jackson gathered yesterday. Manning's mother and grandmother made the trip from Baltimore, bringing him a pair of dress pants and a white button-down shirt Monday morning to wear during jury selection.

Manning has been charged with attempted first- and second-degree murder, first- and second-degree assault and carrying a weapon with intent to injure. He could face a life sentence if convicted of attempted murder.

The prosecution called several witnesses to the stand, including Jackson, who lives in North Carolina. Jackson testified that he had tried to buy cocaine from Manning the day of the shooting, but that the deal never took place.

Jackson later asked another acquaintance, Nathan Hicks, to "front" him some drugs. When Hicks said no, Jackson testified, he offered to lend him his girlfriend's car, a Suzuki Esteem, in exchange for two \$20 "rocks" of cocaine.

When Hicks hadn't returned the car by midnight, Jackson went looking for him, he said. As he approached two people sitting on a bench behind the Fall River Terrace apartment complex in the 5500 block of Harpers Farm Road to ask whether they had seen Hicks, Jackson said, someone shot him from behind a nearby trash bin.

Jackson said he turned around and saw Manning with a shotgun.

After Manning and the two others, one of whom Jackson identified as Tavon Donya Sands, left the scene, Jackson made his way back to his apartment. There, he testified, he knocked on the window and told his girlfriend, "Call 911. I've been shot."

Jackson's girlfriend, Hythern Audrey Walker, testified earlier yesterday that Jackson had bought cocaine from Manning before. She said she once gave Manning one of her rings in exchange for drugs.

Officer Douglas Catherman, who responded to the scene first, testified that Jackson identified the shooter that night as "Black," a nickname used by Manning, after first saying he didn't know who had shot him.

Catherman said he thought Jackson was referring to Roberto Joseph Brathwaite, who also uses the street name "Black" and whose driver's license was found that morning in Jackson's girlfriend's car after Hicks returned it.

Catherman testified that he asked Jackson before he was flown to Maryland Shock Trauma Center whether he meant Brathwaite and that Jackson said yes. Jackson said "Black" was wearing his hair in dreadlocks and that he stayed at the nearby Abbott House apartment complex at Harpers Farm Road and Cedar Lane.

Manning often visited that high-rise, where his teen-age girlfriend, Shanae Griffiths, and their 13-month-old daughter, Shaquelle, lived, Griffiths told The Sun last year. Abbott House management had banned him from the property for alleged infractions, including destruction of property.

Police searched Griffiths' apartment for "Black" that night but found no one. Manning was arrested the next day.

In his opening statement, Bernhardt connected Jackson's shooting to the shooting the night before of Raymond Lawson, a 17-year-old from Wilde Lake, in the 5400 block of Harpers Farm Road, a block and a half away.

He said Manning was present at the time of the Jackson shooting but that Sands pulled the trigger. Sands, he said, thought Jackson had been involved in Lawson's shooting and wanted to get back at him.

"It was a `square' thing," said Bernhardt.

"Mr. Manning sells drugs," he said. "He's a bad person for doing that. But that doesn't mean he shoots people."

The prosecution does not intend to call Sands as a witness. Bernhardt told the jury it would hear testimony from Manning.

Maurice Green, 21, of the 400 block of Poplar Street in Baltimore faces attempted-murder charges in connection with Lawson's shooting. He was released on bail in November.

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Jackson is scheduled to testify again this morning.

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