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Friday, November 23, 2007

National spotlight falling on Grant trial

Live broadcasts banned as media outlets swarm in

George Hunter / The Detroit News

MOUNT CLEMENS -- While the media scrutinizes every aspect of Stephen Grant's murder trial, court officials will be watching the media.

The case has attracted intense national interest since the story of the slaying of his wife, Tara, broke in February. "Dateline NBC," "20/20" and "48 Hours" are among the media outlets expected to join local reporters in covering the trial, which is set to begin Tuesday.

The national spotlight has forced Macomb Circuit Judge Diane Druzinski to take precautions to ensure the trial doesn't become a circus, court spokesman Phil Frame said.

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"Her job is to make sure proper decorum is conducted in the courtroom, with a minimum of distractions," Frame said. "Her No. 1 priority is making sure Mr. Grant gets a fair trial."

As late as this week, it wasn't clear if the trial would proceed on schedule. A TV interview by Grant's lawyer, Stephen Rabaut, on Friday prompted Prosecutor Eric Smith to request that Rabaut be held in contempt of court and the trial delayed. Druzinski ruled the interview wasn't improper and that the trial could go on as planned.

Grant confessed to police that he strangled and dismembered his wife following an argument on Feb. 9. Prosecutors will try to convict him of first-degree murder by convincing a jury he had enough time to contemplate his actions during the several minutes it likely took Tara Grant to die.

Grant's attorneys have argued in pretrial hearings that their client acted in a fit of rage that night and that his actions were not premeditated.

Druzinski's decision to ban live broadcasts of the trial likely was made to ensure those legal arguments don't degenerate into grandstanding, University of Detroit Mercy law professor Larry Dubin said.

"I'm disappointed that the trial won't be broadcast live, because I think there's a benefit when the public gets to see how the court process works," Dubin said. "But I can also understand why the judge decided not to allow it.

"When you have a live broadcast, there's always the danger of grandstanding by attorneys and witnesses." Extra Macomb Sheriff's deputies will be deployed, said Capt. David Teske, director of special security details.

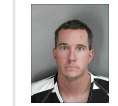
Reporters, camera operators and photographers covering the trial will be issued badges. An officer will be stationed at the courtroom door throughout the trial to collect the badges of media members entering and leaving the room, Teske said.

"We'll also have to give the jury extra care, to make sure there are no improprieties," he said. The attention given to the case already has caused court officials to deviate from their normal procedures. After Grant was arrested in March, Chief Circuit Judge Antonio Viviano went outside the court's list of public defenders to appoint attorneys Stephen Rabaut and Gail Pamukov to represent Grant.

Viviano said it was the first time he had ever done that, but he said he hand-picked Grant's defense team to make sure he got a fair trial amid all the media scrutiny.



Stephen Grant's trial in the slaying of his wife starts Tuesday.



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The court also has called a jury pool of between 400 and 450 people -- about three times the normal number -- because it will be tough finding jurors who haven't been influenced by the media's coverage, Dubin said.

"It's going to be challenging to find an impartial jury because of the extraordinary amount of pretrial publicity," Dubin said.

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