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Wife dead, Grant left love note to au pair

Case focuses on whether slaying was premeditated

George Hunter and Edward L. Cardenas / The Detroit News

MOUNT CLEMENS -- Within seconds of killing his wife, Tara, a naked Stephen Grant sent a text message to the couple's German au pair and left her a note on her pillow saying "you owe me a kiss," according to the prosecution's opening statements Friday in Grant's murder trial.

"Have you ever wondered what goes through the mind of someone who just killed his wife?" Prosecutor Eric Smith asked the jury. "Sex."

Grant's attorney Gail Pamukov did not dispute in her opening statement that Grant killed his wife on Feb. 9. But, she said, he became enraged after Tara belittled him, and strangled her -- then, in a panic, Pamukov argued, Grant dismembered his wife's body while in a confused haze.

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Grant pleaded guilty to the dismemberment Friday after the jury was seated but before jury members were brought into the room.

Legal experts say the plea, along with Pamukov's acknowledgement that Grant killed his wife, is the best way to try to get the first-degree murder charges against him reduced to second-degree murder, or even manslaughter.

"Although evidence will be heard about the dismemberment, the defense can now argue that he accepts responsibility for that crime," University of Detroit-Mercy law professor Larry Dubin said. "That may help bolster his argument that his state of mind was not consistent with first-degree murder."

Sterling Heights lawyer Charlie Langton, who has attended the court proceedings since jury selection began, said it was "smart" for Pamukov to admit that Grant killed his wife -- "otherwise, the rest of their arguments wouldn't be credible," he said. "Grant's attorneys want the jury to focus only on whether or not his actions were premeditated."

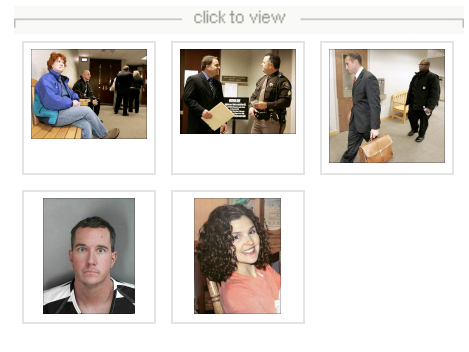
The high-profile trial is scheduled to continue Tuesday. Circuit Judge Diane Druzinski said she was "cautiously optimistic" the proceedings would wrap up before Christmas.

During Smith's 35-minute opening statement, he said Grant had fallen in love with his au pair, Verena Dierkes, then 19, and that he immediately tried to communicate with her after the murder.

"He's naked," Smith said of Grant that night. "He (sends a text message to) the woman he's fallen in love with that she owes him a kiss. Then he left a note on her pillow saying the same thing. To do this, he had to walk past Tara's still warm and lifeless body while his children slept nearby."



Stephen Grant's sister, Kelly Utykanski, waits outside the courtroom as the trial begins Friday at Macomb County Circuit Court. Utykanski is among the dozens of people on the prosecution's witness list. (Todd McInturf / The Detroit News)



Extras

What's next

The Stephen Grant murder trial is scheduled to resume at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday in Macomb County Circuit Court. Among the dozens of people on the prosecution's witness list are Verena Dierkes, the Grants' German au pair who is alleged to have had a sexual relationship with Grant; Alicia Standerfer, Tara Grant's sister; and Kelly Utykanski, Stephen Grant's sister.

Pamukov argued in her opening statements that Grant's actions did not amount to first-degree murder.

"These were the actions of a man who was panicked," she said. "I'm asking you to keep an open mind. This is a terrible, tragic story. There are no winners."

Pamukov said she intends to prove that Grant reacted to "demeaning statements" made by his wife the night of the murder.

"The events of Feb. 9 were the results of a pot that had simmered for a long time before it finally boiled out of control," Pamukov said.

Smith said in his opening statements that Grant and his au pair had been flirting with each other in the weeks leading up to the murder, "and during the week of Feb. 9, their relationship turned physical," he said.

"Verena was the perfect person to take Tara's place," Smith said. "The defendant had fallen in love with Verena. When he slept with the au pair, it marked the end of Tara's life."

Dierkes returned home to Germany days after the slaying.

Smith described to the jury of 10 women and six men how Stephen and Tara Grant argued about her job, which kept her away from home most days.

"When Tara came home (from an overseas assignment), they argued," Smith said of Feb. 9. "She tried to walk away, and he grabbed her by the wrist. Then she slapped him in the face. He then knocks her to the ground, and while Tara was still on the floor, he gets on top of her, wraps his hands around her neck, and squeezes until she was dead."

Smith said Grant then put a belt around his wife's neck, dragged her into his garage, and put her body in the back of Tara's car inside their garage.

"The next day, he spends the day with his kids, and then that night, he sleeps with Verena," Smith said. "All the while his wife's dead body is still in the back of her car in the garage."

On Feb. 11, Grant "took this crime to a new level" by mutilating his wife's body, Smith said.

"After cutting up her body, he then goes home, plays with the kids, and then sleeps with Verena again," Smith said. "He portrayed himself to (Verena) as a wounded husband whose wife left him."

In an attempt to cover up his crime, Grant left several messages on his wife's cell phone in the days after the murder, Smith said.

"In the messages, (Grant) was sounding increasingly angry," Smith said. "He said, 'you should at least call and talk to the kids. You owe them that much at least.'"

After opening statements, the prosecution called its first witness: Macomb County Sheriff's Deputy William Hughes, who took Grant's report on Feb. 14, when he reported Tara Grant missing.

Hughes testified that Grant told him that he didn't know when Tara was going to return.

"I don't think I want her to return," Hughes said Grant told him.

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