

National Mock Trial Championship Explores Fictional Murder Set In Hartford

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Teenagers in power suits, a coroner's finding of blunt force trauma, an exhibit photo of a bloody hockey stick and tears on the witness stand - from the Abraham A. Ribicoff Federal Building to Hartford Superior Court, nearly 50 high school teams from across the nation brought their best prosecution and defense of a made-up crime that had all the trappings of a made-for-TV blockbuster. The crux of the fictional Hartford case - the homicide of a teenage girl, potentially at the hands of a fellow teen - was "very loosely" based on the 1975 real-life Greenwich slaying that led to the eventual murder conviction of Kennedy cousin Michael Skakel, said Beth DeLuco, executive director of Civics First, an educational nonprofit in the state that is hosting the championship. Wary of a tabloid frenzy, the Hartford Police Department initially spun the homicide as a violent robbery, noting in a (mock) press release that Sigourney's cellphone and purse were missing - but omitting a pertinent detail: the dead teenager's wallet, with dollar bills poking out, was left at the crime scene (Exhibit 2 photo). "In addition to serving as a realistic homicide trial experience, it is our hope that this problem...

FULL TEXT

Who killed Sigourney Porter?

The shocking, fictional whodunnit saturated federal and state courtrooms Friday as the brightest young legal minds in the country converged on the capital city to prove their case in the National High School Mock Trial Championship.

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"If it had a name, what does doubt look like?" Traterrious Holmes, 18, a senior at South Carolina's Strom Thurmond High School, said in an opening statement Friday in the first round against Connecticut state champion Trumbull High School. "Ladies and gentlemen of this jury, by the end of this trial, doubt will be revealed."

The crux of the fictional Hartford case - the homicide of a teenage girl, potentially at the hands of a fellow teen - was "very loosely" based on the 1975 real-life Greenwich slaying that led to the eventual murder conviction of Kennedy cousin Michael Skakel, said Beth DeLuco, executive director of Civics First, an educational nonprofit in the state that is hosting the championship.

A group of area attorneys and esteemed judges spent two years crafting the details of the case that have stirred awe and fascination among the mock trial community. Students received State of Connecticut v. Wilbur Merritt IV about six weeks ago, memorizing witness statements and trial exhibits and plotting arguments.

The competitors have already been tested: They are state champions from California to Maine, plus Guam, South Korea and Northern Mariana Islands. Ridgefield High School, the state runner-up, is also in the tournament that culminates in the national championship round Saturday in the Connecticut Supreme Court.

Team Minnesota senior Kate Redetzke, 17, an aspiring teacher from Lakeville South High School in the suburbs of Minneapolis, described the case as "gory," yet full of nuance, intrigue and a confession rife with reasonable doubt.

Mock trial cases are typically "pretty dry," said Julie Cotton, 17, a Manchester, N.H., senior on the all-girls squad from Central High School. Last year, when the elite Phillips Exeter Academy won the New Hampshire title, the case for the national championship in Idaho was a civil suit that centered on sheep disease, Cotton pointed out.

"They usually are like, 'Oh, we don't want to make it too violent,'" she said. "This is all out."

The case begins with these basic facts: After attending a costume party at the historic Mark Twain House in Hartford, a crew of preppy high schoolers snuck out to a secluded area at Adriaen's Landing for late-night partying on Halloween 2014. Among the underage revelers were teens dressed up as Hartford Whalers, all carrying near-identical hockey sticks - one of which would become the murder weapon.

Sigourney Porter, a beloved 17-year-old from a "tough" Hartford neighborhood who attended a Farmington school through the Open Choice desegregation program, was at the riverfront, too, partying with friends in her UConn basketball outfit. Sigourney's mother had been waitressing at the exclusive Twain event, but the younger Miss Porter got an invitation through her wealthy pal, Leslie Crandall of tony Scarborough Street.

Sigourney didn't make it home. Her fingerprints, and those of two other people, were found on a discarded wine bottle near her body.

"Sig was dead," a mournful Leslie, played by Trumbull High senior Olivia Bonaventura, said on the witness stand Friday. "My best friend was dead."

Wary of a tabloid frenzy, the Hartford Police Department initially spun the homicide as a violent robbery, noting in a (mock) press release that Sigourney's cellphone and purse were missing - but omitting a pertinent detail: the dead teenager's wallet, with dollar bills poking out, was left at the crime scene (Exhibit 2 photo).

Despite fingerprints and some DNA evidence, the case went cold until Wilbur Merritt IV, who attended "Loomis School" in Windsor at the time of the murder, supposedly confessed to killing Sigourney during a pressure-packed confession ritual for the "Cloak & Dagger" secret society at an elite New Haven university.

Thread throughout the narrative are thinly veiled, big-time institutions and a mash-up of character names that would sound familiar to Nutmeggers.

"All the names have some type of historical significance where you have to be from Connecticut to get it," said Superior Court Judge Hope Seeley, a former mock trial adviser and long-ago Skakel lawyer who is a volunteer judge for the tournament.

Seeley is listed as a co-author of the case, which includes a preface in the introduction that serves as a warning label of sorts for the mock trialers.

Not only is there a grisly murder of a girl their age, but one potential witness - or alternative suspect? - overdosed on a fatal cocktail of painkillers and vodka soon after Sigourney's funeral. Winchester Colt III's final words were sent through text messages: "How did I let this happen? I loved you Sig. I failed you. I shouldn't have. ... I just need to be with u again to make this right."

Although a work of fiction, "our committee is all too aware of the very real dangers of substance abuse because nearly all of us are participants, as members of the bar and bench, in Connecticut's criminal justice system - and many are parents of teenagers as well," the preface stated.

"In addition to serving as a realistic homicide trial experience, it is our hope that this problem is illustrative of the tragic consequences - including the deaths of very young people - that can result from substance abuse," the statement continued. "If you are worried about someone who is abusing drugs or alcohol, we plead with you to seek help from your parents or school counselors before it is too late."

The life-like details spilled into Hartford courtrooms Friday, with presiding judges in black robes, actual bailiffs, student courtroom artists, and edge-of-their-seat spectators on hand for mock-trial showdowns that were part "Law & Order" drama with flashes of debate-club quickness.

Scores of volunteer lawyers and judges from the region and around the country have helped out with proceedings, including scoring that is kept private until the weekend. Among the biggest sponsors are the Connecticut Bar Association and local law firms.

Teams must prepare for both the prosecution and defense roles, and while they got a brief respite Thursday evening for opening ceremonies at Dunkin' Donuts Park, there hasn't been much time to explore the Hartford they got to know through the Sigourney Porter case, students said. For the first round, teams didn't know which side they would argue until Friday morning.

Ariana Rojas, 18, a Trumbull High senior who plans to study molecular cell biology at UConn, argued in the prosecution's closing arguments that physical evidence, tied with Will Merritt's own confession, left no doubt of Sigourney's killer.

"These are the words, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, of a murderer," Rojas said.

In defense, Strom Thurmond High School returned to its theme of doubt. Before his suicide, and before Sigourney's death, Win Colt was one of the last people to see her alive. Sig was an ex-girlfriend whom he still wanted, and Will Merritt, a lacrosse player with a temper, was his rival for her affection.

"Doubt has a name," the jury heard. "Winchester Colt III."

Credit: VANESSA DE LA TORRE

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