

Conviction In '05 Fatal Shooting Overturned Appellate Judges Also Reverse Murder Verdict in Stabbing

By Ruben Castaneda

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A Maryland appellate court has overturned the murder conviction of a former star Howard University medical student who was found guilty in Prince George's County of fatally shooting her ex-boyfriend.

A three-judge panel of the Court of Special Appeals ruled 2 to 1 Monday that Circuit Court Judge Richard H. Sothoron Jr. should have allowed the defense to introduce into evidence seven handwritten letters and an e-mail from the former boyfriend to the defendant, Abere Karibi-Ikiriko, who is 28 now.

The defense wanted to use the letters to show that Okechukwu "Will" Ohiri was so desperate to resume his relationship with Karibi-Ikiriko that he tried to force himself on her at gunpoint. Defense attorneys said such evidence would bolster their argument that the shooting was an accident that occurred in self-defense.

Sothoron ruled that to be relevant, the letters and e-mail had to have been written or sent just before the shooting. In one letter, Ohiri wrote, "God knows that I'll give up anything just to experience all these passions with you again One Last Time."

The appellate court ruling might lead to a new trial for Karibi-Ikiriko. State's Attorney Glenn F. Ivey said he has asked the state attorney general's office to appeal the ruling to the state's Court of Appeals, Maryland's highest court.

A Prince George's jury convicted Karibi-Ikiriko of second-degree murder Aug. 8, 2005, and acquitted her of first-degree murder. She was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The shooting occurred about 7 p.m. Jan. 15, 2005, in Karibi-Ikiriko's home in Capitol Heights. Although they had broken up, Ohiri, who was 26 when he died, was renting the basement of the home.

At the trial, Karibi-Ikiriko testified that she entered the basement to do laundry in preparation for a trip to Austria to attend a Nobel Prize conference. Ohiri arrived and talked of reuniting, and Karibi-Ikiriko angrily rebuffed him, she testified.

Ohiri went upstairs and returned with a handgun she had bought for protection, Karibi-Ikiriko testified. She said Ohiri directed her to a couch and pulled up the long nightgown she was wearing.

When he put the gun on a cushion, she picked it up. Ohiri grabbed it back, and the gun went off, wounding Ohiri in the chest, Karibi-Ikiriko told jurors.

Karibi-Ikiriko's attorney, James N. Papirmeister, said he was not surprised the conviction was thrown out.

In another case Monday, a three-judge panel of the Court of Special Appeals threw out the second-degree murder conviction of a man who was found guilty by a Prince George's jury of stabbing a man during a fracas at a Temple Hills nightclub.

The reversal could mean that Antjuan Riddick, who was sentenced to 30 years in prison, would get another trial. As with the Karibi-Ikiriko case, Ivey said he asked the attorney general to appeal the reversal to the Court of Appeals.

Riddick was convicted of fatally stabbing Daniel McDowell during a fight at 2 a.m. June 23, 2004, at the Legends nightclub.

During his closing argument, Assistant Public Defender Dent Lynch focused on differences between a key state witness's statement to the police and his trial testimony. In his rebuttal, then-Assistant State's Attorney Rex Gordon told jurors: "I want you to remember that if any one of you . . . witness a murder and wound up sitting in that witness chair nine or 10 months later, some defense lawyer, somewhere in that trial, would be standing in front of a jury, making the snide and condescending and obnoxious comments about you."

Lynch's objection was overruled, and Gordon continued: "It is just their stock in trade. It is what they do when their client is guilty and there is no defense."

The appellate court ruled that Gordon's comments attacking defense attorneys as a group were an improper appeal to the prejudices of the jurors.

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