



Prosecutors drop charges, man freed after nearly 3 years in jail in Lakeland triple murder case

By **Suzie Schottelkotte**

BARTOW — After sitting in the Polk County Jail for two years and nine months, Tavaris Mack tasted freedom this week when prosecutors dropped the charges accusing him of murdering three people during a Lakeland home-invasion robbery in January 2016.

Chief Assistant State Attorney Jacob Orr said the lone survivor of the attack recently told prosecutors he no longer was certain that Mack, 29, was one of the three men involved in the killings.

Prosecutors said they also encountered other issues with evidence in the case, prompting them to dismiss the charges against Mack, who was scheduled to stand trial beginning Jan. 7.

“Due to a change in the testimony of a key witness, new information obtained from cellphone records and a new witness listed by the defendant,” he said, “there is insufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Tavaris Mack is guilty of the crimes alleged.”

Prosecutors said newly identified defense witnesses told them Mack was in Miami at the time of the murders, and cellphone technology also placed his cellphone there.

Mack, of Miami, was released from custody Wednesday, the same day prosecutors dismissed the charges against him. He’d been in custody since March 2016, jail records show.

Mack was one of four men indicted in the murders of 25-year-old David Washington and two women — Stacy Branch, 31, and Angelica Castro, who had just turned 23 when she was gunned down in her bed.

According to court records, Washington had returned to Lakeland from a brief trip to Miami the morning of the shootings. Prosecutors said he had engaged in a drug transaction in South Florida, and had been at his house along East Magnolia Street only a couple of hours when the assailants burst inside.

They demanded drugs and money before shooting the four people in the house, killing three of them, according to Polk County Sheriff’s Office reports. Campos, who was shot in the face, told authorities he feigned death until the assailants left.

Johnathan Alcegaire, 29, of Miami was convicted in September of three counts of first-degree murder, along with other charges related to the assault. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty, and Alcegaire’s lawyers

said he has instructed them not to present a defense for him. Jurors voted unanimously to recommend that he be sentenced to death.

Sentencing is Jan. 4 before Circuit Judge Jalal Harb.

During Alcegaire's trial, the survivor, Felix Campos, testified that Jamaal Smith was the gunman in the attack. Prosecutors said he hasn't wavered in that identification.

Smith, also of Miami, 28, is scheduled for a status conference Feb. 7, but no date has been set for his trial. He's been held in the Polk County Jail without bail since his arrest March 15, 2016.

The fourth defendant in the case, Andrew Joseph, is charged with felony murder on allegations he arranged for the three assailants to rob Washington, including renting the panel van they were driving when the home invasion took place, according to court records. He has a status hearing in February and is scheduled to stand trial Jan. 6, 2020, court records show.

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