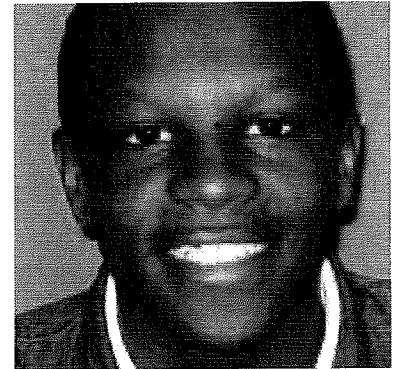


Atlantic City teen charged with killing another will stay in juvenile system

LYNDA COHEN, Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, June 22, 2016 5:00 pm

The Atlantic City teenager accused of fatally gunning down a 13-year-old two years ago should not be tried as an adult, a state appellate panel has ruled.

The decision confirms one made in August by Atlantic County Family Court Judge Michael Blee, and paints a picture of the alleged shooter as a respectful teen who struggled to survive growing up in the drug-and-gang culture of Atlantic City's streets.



Jerome Ford

Jerome Ford

More teens being waived up to adult court for violent crimes, law-enforcement officials say

Jamil Ragsdale should have graduated from high school last month. Instead, he was convicted in an Atlantic City armed robbery and could be heading to prison for 20 years.

“My faith in the legal system was just confirmed by this decision,” defense attorney Joseph Swift said. “I am proud to be a part of it.”

Jerome Ford was a month from his 15th birthday when he allegedly opened fire on a group of students along Route 30 in Atlantic City, shortly after school let out Jan. 8, 2014.

Angel Mercado-Santiago, a seventh-grader at the nearby Pennsylvania Avenue School, died at the scene, despite the efforts of a nurse who was driving by. A 15-year-old, identified only as D.T., was wounded but survived.

Ford, now 17, is charged with murder, aggravated assault and weapons offense. He has been at Harborfields Juvenile Detention Center in Egg Harbor City since turning himself in two days after the killing.

While there, he has been “a model resident,” a Harborfields social worker testified during a 12-day hearing quoted in the appellate filing.

In fact, defense expert Dr. Ronald Gruen, a clinical psychologist, said Ford seemed relieved to be in Harborfields and not on the street being bullied, the record states.

In 2012, Ford complained to his eighth-grade teacher that he had been jumped by grown men, the woman testified. She also said another boy in class threatened to shoot Ford in the face and have other students beat him up.

Year after A.C. killing, decision to try teen suspect as adult lingers

Jerome Ford was arrested and charged with murder days after a seventh-grader was gunned down on his way home from school in Atlantic City.

Boys would often come to school to fight Ford or his younger brother, and Ford once cried to the teacher that boys were fighting with him outside the school.

The record does not indicate where he attended eighth grade. He was a freshman at Atlantic City's alternative high school, Viking Academy, at the time of the shooting.

The teacher said she never saw Ford act as the aggressor, and he often protected himself and his brother.

"He really suffered from poor self-esteem and he felt obligated to protect his brother and he didn't feel he was doing a very good job of that either," Gruen testified. "And I think that, you know, this tormented him. And, when you're a young adolescent like that, you want to be king of the hill. And I think he felt very small and very defenseless."

Ford was associated with a gang in Stanley Holmes Village, while Mercado-Santiago was affiliated with a rival gang in the city's Back Maryland neighborhood, according to information given at the hearing.

Atlantic City teen accused of killing 13-year-old surrenders to police

The Atlantic City teenager wanted in the killing of a seventh-grader last week has turned himself in.

Photos of Ford with other Harborfields residents were "posted online with gang verbiage on them," according to testimony by Atlantic City Police Sgt. Chris Barber. He also said several tweets on Twitter showed a gang affiliation for Ford.

"I thought he denied and minimized his involvement with youth gang activity, as well as his drug-selling behavior and drug use," testified Dr. Louis Schlesinger, a forensic psychologist for the state. "I challenged him at a few points, as I do with every individual, and he kept his composure. He was never disrespectful throughout, ever. He was not hostile. He did become tearful when discussing his future."

Ford admitted to using marijuana and, at one point, prescription drugs, Schlesinger said.

The teen's sometimes inconsistent and untruthful answers did not bode well for rehabilitation, the state's psychologist said. He was also concerned about Ford's low-average intelligence and personality deficiencies that Schlesinger said could lead to a disorder.

The day before the killing, the victim fought Ford's cousin, who is not named, Sgt. David Weiss testified. The fight was recorded on a cell phone and posted on Facebook.

Mercado-Santiago and another boy, identified as C.G., threatened retaliation.

After school that day, C.G. punched Ford in the face four or five times, according to the testimony. He then ran away, telling others that Ford had a gun.

A short time later, the investigation found, Ford pulled out a gun and opened fire.

The teen's mother has remained involved in his life, indicating she tried to stop the bullying several times before the shooting. She also has been in the top 1 percent of parental involvement for Harborfields residents, a social worker there testified.

She said Harborfields has a point system for rewards, such as longer visits, and Ford is in the top two.

The facility does not release information about how many residents it serves, according to a woman who answered the phone there. There are seven secure beds for girls and 20 for boys, according to its website.

Ford has voluntarily taken after-school classes there, including one that teaches residents decision-making skills, the social worker testified, and he is in the top 5 percent of residents in terms of behavior.

The 30-page appellate decision additionally points out that legislation passed at the time of Blee's ruling makes 15 the cutoff for waiving a juvenile up to adult court. But Blee did not take that into consideration in his ruling, and Appellate Judge Robert Gilson disagreed with that part of the panel's decision, saying it was unnecessary to resolve the case.

"I was confident Judge Blee's decision would be affirmed," said Swift, Ford's attorney. "But I didn't expect the appellate division would use this case and (the judge's) decision as a precedent on how these cases should be handled in the future. Judge Blee was fair to both sides and he got it 100 percent right."

Pending a higher appeal, the case will now continue in Juvenile Division. Ford could either go to trial or take a plea.

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