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Drug dealer refuses role of 'real killer'

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Corey Stephens arrived in handcuffs and dripping with attitude as he entered the witness box refusing to be cast as the real killer of 11-year-old Ephraim Brown.

Currently in custody on charges of importing a kilo of cocaine, Stephens admitted he's a convicted drug dealer who's been shot in the past, but insisted he's never had a gun himself and certainly wasn't the one who opened fire at a birthday party three years ago.

"Where's your facts?" Stephens erupted angrily during questioning Tuesday. "Who seen me with a gun that day? Come on, man."

Yet by the time they were finished with him, defence lawyers had the belligerent criminal right where they wanted him: looking like a pretty interesting alternate suspect.

Akiel Eubank and Gregory Sappleton have pleaded not guilty to second-degree murder in a shootout July 22, 2007 that killed Ephraim in the crossfire. The jury has heard the two men belonged to rival gangs: Eubank to the Five Point Generalz, which is affiliated with the Crips, while Sappleton was a member of the competing Baghdad Crew, linked to the Bloods.

Ephraim's cousin Kishauna Thomas had been hosting a joint 18th birthday barbecue with a girlfriend in the backyard of a North York townhouse when the two groups were unwittingly brought together. She testified that she saw Eubank and Sappleton firing at each other from opposite ends of a tunnel that bisected the housing complex on Sheppard Ave. W.

But Thomas is the Crown's only eyewitness to the shooting and has been accused of lying by both defence counsel.

Instead, Sappleton's lawyer Edward Sapiano presented Stephens as the real culprit and Eubank's lawyer Leora Shemesh did her part in driving that theory home.

Certainly not with Stephens co-operation, mind you. According to the testy drug dealer who admits to many brain cells eviscerated by marijuana, he wasn't even there that night.

Earlier in the day he'd been playing basketball with Ephraim and teaching him how to shoot, he said. As guests began to arrive in the evening for the birthday party, he decided to leave their neighbourhood and head downtown.

"There were too many strange faces," Stephens told the jury. "I heard somebody wanted to shoot me or some s---. There were rumours that I was supposed to get shot that day.

"I don't know what's going on, so I left."

His own sister, though, suggested he was there during the shooting. Shevonne Stephens-Brown, 18, said their mom asked her to look for her brother in the neighbourhood that night when she heard gunshots and Kishauna Thomas yelling, "No, Corey, no."

Thomas's sister Simone Osborne also testified for the defence, saying she was told by her sister that she never actually saw who was firing but was too afraid of Stephens to tell police she'd seen him there that night.

For his part, Stephens insisted he was downtown "chillin' and smokin' weed" and was about to meet up with a friend in the entertainment district when a separate shooting closed down the nightclub. But he refused to divulge the identity of this mysterious pal.

"I don't know his government name and I'm not giving you his street name," he insisted.

Stephens also maintained he's never had a weapon, despite working as a drug dealer. But when questioned by police on another matter 10 months after Ephraim's murder, he was quoted as telling them he had a gun but only "in the past."

Shemesh suggested he was referring to the new weapon he'd just acquired around the time of the birthday party and was test firing when Ephraim was killed.

"Have you ever seen me with a gun?" demanded the angry Stephens.

He refused to be their alternate suspect. Instead, he offered himself as an innocent man riddled with guilt because he was the intended target.

"People were coming to do me something and a little boy gets killed. I'm going to feel like s---," he explained. "If I was there, we would have seen what happened. Probably would have been a different scenario. Maybe I would have got shot — not him."

Better him than an 11-year-old boy.

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