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Hollywood tells his story

By COLBY FRAZIER — June 24, 2009

Jesse James Hollywood's windows had just been smashed out, and he was mad. He hopped into a white utility van with a couple of friends and drove away from his home in the San Fernando Valley, bound for Santa Barbara.

Minutes later, Hollywood, who testified yesterday in Superior Court during his capital murder trial, said he spotted 15-year-old Nicholas Markowitz, whose older brother had just admitted to breaking out the windows. The van came to a stop, and Hollywood got out.

"I pinned him up against a tree and I said 'Where's your brother, where's your brother?'" Hollywood recalled, adding that while he asked this, his friend, William Skidmore, punched the boy in the gut, and then the duo "ushered" him into the van.

Hollywood called the "taking" of Nicholas Markowitz "impulsive," and "irrational." He was fuming over his broken windows, he calmly explained. But he insisted he had no intention at any time to hurt the boy, nor did he believe anyone else would.

But a few days after the kidnapping, Nicholas Markowitz's bullet-riddled body was found buried in a shallow grave at a rugged area off West Camino Cielo Road known as Lizard's Mouth.

Prosecutors say Hollywood, 29, ordered his cohorts to execute the boy to cover up the kidnapping. They say Hollywood kidnapped Nicholas Markowitz in order to pressure the boy's older brother, Ben Markowitz, into paying a drug debt he owed the defendant. He has pleaded not guilty to murder and kidnapping charges. If convicted, he could face the death penalty.

The defendant's testimony, which began on Monday and has not yet concluded, has offered a rare first-hand glimpse into the details surrounding Nicholas Markowitz's murder — details that have been hashed and rehashed countless times over the years, most publicly in the feature film, "Alpha Dog."

But Hollywood's version of the events surrounding crime differs greatly from that of prosecutors, who have had some success over the years portraying the man as a drug-dealing thug; a mastermind who ordered his drug-dealing friends around, and ultimately, asked them to get rid of Nicholas Markowitz.

However, Hollywood, dressed in a black suit, dark tie and gray shirt, told the jury yesterday that this simply wasn't the case.

"He wasn't in any danger ..." he said, adding that before he left Santa Barbara on Aug. 6, 2000, the day Nicholas Markowitz was kidnapped, he was smoking marijuana and playing video games

with the boy.

Hollywood did say Skidmore, whom he characterized as being “aggressive,” had taped Nicholas up shortly after they arrived in Santa Barbara. But when Hollywood saw the boy had been taped, he told Skidmore to remove it.

In order to “deescalate” the situation, Hollywood said he allowed Skidmore and Brian Affronti, another man who accompanied them to Santa Barbara, to take the van back to Los Angeles. Lacking wheels, Hollywood said he called around, searching for a ride back to Los Angeles. When he left, Nicholas Markowitz remained in Santa Barbara with Ruge.

The following day, Hollywood said he returned to Santa Barbara to pick up \$500 in drug money from Ruge. While there, he said he briefly saw Nicholas, and asked him if he wanted to go home.

“We sat and smoked some pot in Ruge’s bedroom,” he said. “I asked him if he wanted to go back to the valley with us, he said ‘No, I’m cool.’”

“I didn’t believe there was any danger at that point in time and I didn’t know what was going to happen.”

On August 8, Hollywood met with his real estate agent, who is also his second cousin, and signed papers giving the man permission to sell his home. The defendant said he wanted to move out because of threats he’d received from Ben Markowitz.

Hollywood said he also consulted his attorney, to get “advice” about the kidnapping situation. “I was concerned about the initial taking of Nick from the valley to Santa Barbara. I was concerned because I thought it might be a crime,” he said.

Hollywood said his attorney advised him to “take the guy home,” and to contact the police. But, Hollywood explained, calling the police wasn’t an option because he was involved in “illicit activity.”

Later this day, Hollywood, who kept a cool demeanor on the stand and often answered questions with a “yes, sir,” or “no, sir,” went to the home of his close friend, Casey Sheehan.

Throughout the day, the defendant said Ruge contacted him, asking for a ride back to the Los Angeles area. Hollywood, saying he had plans to celebrate his girlfriend’s birthday over dinner, said he told Ruge if he could find a car, he’d have someone pick him up.

After arriving at Sheehan’s home, Hollywood said he asked to borrow his car. The defendant’s other friend, Ryan Hoyt (Hoyt shot Nicholas and is awaiting the death penalty in San Quentin State Prison), was in the process of boxing up Hollywood’s possessions. The defendant said he wanted to check up on the progress.

Hollywood said he was only at his home for a few minutes before leaving with Hoyt and heading back to Sheehan’s. On the way, the defendant said he explained the situation to Hoyt, who agreed to drive to Santa Barbara, pick up Ruge and Nicholas Markowitz, and drive them home.

“I said to take him home,” Hollywood said of his directions to Hoyt. “He agreed and said it was fine.”

This is where the greatest void exists between Hollywood’s story and that of prosecutors. And since Hoyt wasn’t called as a witness, it’s difficult to know whose version is true.

Prosecutors believe Hollywood told Hoyt to go to Santa Barbara to murder the boy. Hollywood says he only wanted the boy to go home, but for some reason, Hoyt decided to kill him.

THE GUN

Nicholas Markowitz was shot nine times with a specially modified, fully automatic TEC-9 machine pistol that belonged to Hollywood.

Hollywood said yesterday he accepted the lethal, black gun with an elongated ammunition clip, from a person in Reseda, Calif. as payment for a drug debt.

From the factory, the gun is semi-automatic. But Hollywood, who was close friends with Ben Markowitz when he first received the weapon, and even lived with the man for a short time, told him he knew a guy who could “shave the trigger,” making the weapon fully automatic.

Hollywood said it cost \$200 to alter the gun, which he took off a debt owed by the elder Markowitz.

Shortly after the gun had been modified, Hollywood said Hoyt, Ben Markowitz and him took it to an indoor shooting range to give it a test run. But it was short lived.

“One of the employees there told me you could get 10 years just for having that thing,” Hollywood said.

Rattled by this news, Hollywood said they took the gun to Hoyt’s grandparent’s house, where they hid it inside a duffel bag in the garage. He said the gun was stashed at the Hoyt household in mid-November of 1999.

CHANGE OF PLANS

On August 9, Hollywood bought a new Lincoln Town Car, purchased a hefty insurance policy for the vehicle, and showed it off to “anybody.”

“I was happy to have a new car,” he said, adding that he had a lot on his mind between trying to run his “business” and selling his home.

Hollywood said he had a brief phone conversation with Hoyt, who told him everything in Santa Barbara went fine.

“He conveyed to me that he’d taken Rugge to his mother’s house and had taken Nick home and everything was fine,” he said.

It wasn’t until the following day, just before Hoyt’s birthday party, that he apparently told Hollywood what happened.

“He said that he fu—ed up,” Hollywood said. “He said he and Rugge did something bad.”

Hollywood said he was initially confused, adding that Hoyt asked him what he thought Ben Markowitz would do once he found out his little brother had been kidnapped.

Then, “Ryan Hoyt articulated to me that him and Rugge had shot Ben’s brother with the TEC and buried him,” he said.

Hollywood said he asked Hoyt if he was kidding, and was in “disbelief.”

But Hoyt wasn’t kidding, and Hollywood said he wasn’t sure what to do.

“I was stressed out and worried and very concerned that what he had told me was true and this was going to turn into a very bad, bad situation,” he said.

On August 11, Hollywood said he went to see his mother because he wasn’t sure when he would again. The two drove to Palm Springs where they met up with Hollywood’s girlfriend, Michelle Lasher.

The defendant and Lasher drove back to Los Angeles on August 12, or 13, and headed to Skidmore’s house. It was there that Hollywood was told that Nicholas Markowitz had indeed been killed, and authorities were searching for him.

“At that point our little world had become everyone’s world ...” he said. “It deemed on me that there was going to be trouble, for sure.”

Hollywood said he recalled telling Skidmore: “I’m ghost,” meaning he was going to leave town.

A BRAZEN FLIGHT

Despite a widespread manhunt, authorities didn’t capture Hollywood until 2005. He was living in a small beach town in Brazil, where he had a longtime girlfriend, who he referred to yesterday as his wife. The woman even bore the defendant’s child, John Paul.

Hollywood’s trek to Brazil was anything but direct, and yesterday he offered up the first detailed account of his footsteps after the murder.

After speaking with Skidmore, Hollywood and Lasher fled to Las Vegas, where they spent one night in the Bellagio Hotel. The two left the next morning for Colorado Springs, Colo., where Hollywood once lived.

After spending a couple of days there, Hollywood said he sent Lasher home on a plane. He stayed behind and visited with several friends, including his godfather, who he called “Coach.”

Hollywood said he checked into a nearby hotel. While there, he called his godfather from a payphone, but was told the police had already arrived and were looking for him.

With the authorities hot on his trail, Hollywood said he didn’t even return to the hotel.

“I started walking,” he said.

He eventually hitched a ride, and called longtime friend, Chas Salsbury. Hollywood said he was up front with his friend, telling him his presence could bring trouble.

“I basically laid it out for him: that my friends shot someone and I wasn’t involved,” he said.

The defendant said Salsbury agreed to drive him back to Los Angeles for \$3,000 (at the time, Hollywood said he had at least \$12,000 on him). Hollywood said he paid the man and they left.

The two stayed a night in Las Vegas, where Hollywood said Salsbury consulted an attorney, who said prosecutors would be seeking the death penalty against Hollywood.

Asked why he wanted to go back to Los Angeles, Hollywood said he needed “guidance,” and was “scared.”

“I thought I’d lost my life,” he said. “I was definitely praying, crossing myself and asking God to help me, definitely.”

The two arrived in Los Angeles on August 24. After a failed attempt by Salsbury to meet up with Hollywood’s father, Jack Hollywood, the defendant said he opted to be taken to the home of John Roberts, a longtime family friend.

He said Salsbury dropped him off outside, and was supposed to return a short time later. But Salsbury never came back, making off with an additional \$8,000 of his money, the defendant said.

Hollywood said Roberts gave him a manila envelope that contained \$10,000, but refused to help him obtain a passport or fake ID, urging him instead to turn himself in to authorities.

But Hollywood, who said he’d heard himself referred to in the media as a “child killer,” wasn’t ready to do that.

He called another friend who owned a trailer in the Mojave Desert. The spot was so remote and dangerous, he explained, they “wouldn’t even deliver mail.”

Hollywood said he survived for two weeks in the desert on frozen food, beer and cigarettes and spent much of his time watching the news and seeing himself on the program “America’s Most Wanted.”

The more media coverage he saw, the more convinced he became he should flee, he said.

“I felt the media had already convicted me,” he said. “I was scared. I was scared to death. I thought I had no chance at that time.”

Hollywood recalled one especially poignant media moment, during which he watched a tense, eight-hour standoff at John Roberts’s home. Authorities apparently believed Hollywood was there, and was armed.

He said it was reported that the other people arrested in connection to the murder, Hoyt, Rugge, Skidmore and Graham Pressley, all of whom were prosecuted for their involvement in the case,

were all “pointing the finger at the ring leader.”

“They were talking about the death penalty ...” he said. “I was never going to get a fair trial. They had already convicted me in the media.”

At this point, Hollywood said he decided to “catch a flight” to Seattle, Wash., where some friends of his lived.

Asked how he caught a flight, Hollywood said he simply went to LAX.

Before going to the airport, however, he obtained a fake ID.

Hollywood said he stayed in Seattle for two weeks before paying around \$2,000 to be smuggled by boat into Canada, where he spent six months bouncing across the country, traveling by bus between Quebec, Calgary, Montreal and Vancouver.

All the while, Hollywood said he was “laying low.” He said his face was on TV there as well, and he “stuck out like a sore thumb wherever I’d go.”

In Quebec, Hollywood said he paid \$1,000 for a passport that included a five-year visa in Brazil.

Hollywood then said he flew to Cancun, Mexico, and spent two days there before flying to Rio de Janeiro.

Once in Brazil, Hollywood said he met a woman, who he worked for and eventually started dating.

“We had a good relationship,” he said.

Hollywood’s attorney, James Blatt, asked if he ever had any intention to kill Nicholas Markowitz.

“Never,” he said. “I just feel terrible about everything that happened. I feel terrible for the Markowitz family, I feel terrible that people would think I would do something like that.”

CROSS EXAMINATION

Toward the end of the day, Santa Barbara County Chief Trial Deputy Josh Lynn, the lead prosecutor in the case, started his cross-examination of Hollywood.

Lynn began by showing the defendant a picture of Nicholas Markowitz. He asked if Hollywood knew who the boy was, and if he knew why he was on trial.

The defendant said the boy in the picture was Nicholas Markowitz and he was on trial because he’s “being accused of a very serious crime.”

Lynn then asked if he felt he did anything wrong, and despite pointed objections from the defense, Hollywood answered.

“I do and I feel terrible,” he said, adding that he was wrong to not take the boy home and for “pinning him up against a tree and taking him to Santa Barbara.”

Lynn and Hollywood frequently gave each other steely stares. The defendant appeared to frustrate the prosecutor by repeatedly saying he “regretted” what he’d done, and wished it hadn’t occurred.

“I appreciate that,” Lynn said.

When Hollywood answered a question in a manner contrary to what Lynn expected, he’d say, “You sure about that?”

Detail by detail, Lynn asked the defendant about his mental state in the van when he kidnapped Nicholas Markowitz.

Hollywood said he was mad about his windows, and when he saw Nicholas Markowitz walking down the street, he made a “hasty” decision.

“I wish that I never would have seen Nick Markowitz on that day ... there was no plan. I didn’t know what was going to happen.”

Hollywood will resume his testimony this morning at 8:45 in Judge Brian Hill’s Dept. 14 courtroom.