

Los Angeles Times - June 24, 2009

Jesse James Hollywood denies ordering teen's death

The ex-drug dealer expresses regret at the events leading up to Nicholas Markowitz's slaying in Santa Barbara County in 2000. Jurors also hear details of Hollywood's five-year flight from justice.

By Steve Chawkins 10:54 PM PDT, June 23, 2009

Reporting from Santa Barbara — In a dramatic second day on the witness stand, Jesse James Hollywood denied ordering the execution of a 15-year-old West Hills boy to avenge a \$1,200 drug debt owed by the boy's older half-brother.

At least a dozen times, the 29-year-old former marijuana dealer told a Santa Barbara County Superior Court jury how much he regretted the events that led to the 2000 death of Nicholas Markowitz, who was shot nine times and buried in the Santa Barbara foothills.

But prosecutor Joshua Lynn was sharply skeptical, questioning Hollywood's assertion that he had no plans for the boy after snatching him off a San Fernando Valley street and driving him to Santa Barbara.

"Why didn't you just let him out of the van?" Lynn asked, suggesting that he could have given the boy some money to help him make his way back home. "We were already driving to Santa Barbara," Hollywood responded. "I didn't think anything about it. There was no big decision-making process. It just happened. There was no plan."

Facing a possible death sentence, Hollywood is charged with kidnapping and first-degree murder. Prosecutors acknowledge he wasn't at the murder scene but contend he ordered his underlings to kill the boy. Four others already have been convicted in the slaying that was the subject of the 2007 movie "Alpha Dog."

For the first time, jurors heard details of Hollywood's flight from justice -- a five-year odyssey that took him from a trailer in the Mojave Desert to a beach town in Brazil. Along the way he spent six months crisscrossing Canada before buying a fake passport in Quebec for \$2,000.

"I was laying low," he said. "I had no hope. I would never get a fair trial."

Hollywood said the media had already convicted him in the sensational case -- a feeling that he said deepened when he saw repeated accounts of the crime and the global manhunt on shows

such as "America's Most Wanted."

In a calm voice that sometimes dropped to a whisper, he described the few days in August 2000 that culminated in Nicholas' killing. At times, he spoke with lawyerly caution, referring to the kidnapping as "the initial taking" and describing Markowitz being "ushered" into the van.

Over six months, Hollywood said, Markowitz's tough-guy half-brother Ben had mounted a campaign of harassment against him over the debt. Hollywood testified that Ben Markowitz had threatened him and his family, poisoned his dog, and, finally, smashed windows at the San Fernando Valley home that Hollywood was trying to sell to escape Markowitz's wrath.

"The guy had pretty much waged war on me and was coming after me -- like 'Cape Fear' or something," Hollywood testified.

After the window incident, Hollywood said he spotted Nicholas Markowitz on a neighborhood street, got out of the van he was riding in, pinned the boy against a tree and yelled, "Where's your brother?!" Hollywood's friend William Skidmore punched Nicholas in the stomach, Hollywood said, and then the two forced him into the van they were using for a trip to Santa Barbara's annual Fiesta celebration.

Hollywood said he wanted to confront Ben Markowitz but denied that he thought holding Nicholas would lead him to Ben, who was described by prosecutors as a white supremacist who wore swastika tattoos, despite his Jewish background.

Under questioning from his attorney, James Blatt, Hollywood cast himself as a nonviolent type so concerned with Nicholas' welfare that he ordered the boy unbound after Skidmore had tied him up with duct tape.

Worried about Skidmore's "aggressiveness," Hollywood said he had the man drive back to Los Angeles. But Hollywood couldn't answer Lynn's pointed questions about why he didn't let Markowitz go back as well, saying only that he was distracted by "a million things," including the broken windows at his house, which he wanted to show that weekend.

Hollywood's friend, Ryan Hoyt, has been sentenced to death for shooting Markowitz. In court Tuesday, Hollywood said he was shocked when Hoyt, at a birthday party in the Valley, told him that he had killed and buried the boy instead of driving him back home, as Hollywood said he had asked Hoyt to do.

Hollywood said Hoyt believed Markowitz's disappearance was for the best.

"What did you think Ben was going to do when he found out about some guys kidnapping his brother?" Hoyt said, according to Hollywood. Hollywood said he didn't buy that logic and exploded at Hoyt.

"I was in disbelief," Hollywood said. "I was angry -- but he seemed so serious, almost scared,

saying 'What should I do?' "

steve.chawkins@latimes.com