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Man testifies he killed for friend

Ex-girlfriend was target

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Thomson News Service

CANTON — A thief, a liar and a killer.

Joseph Wilkes admits he is all of these. But he insists he is telling the truth when he says he was hired and guided by his friend David G. Thorne to kill Thorne's ex-girlfriend.

Wilkes was asked Thursday why he agreed to slit Yvonne Layne's throat.

"Because I wanted to be No. 1 in David's life, and it was a way to prove myself," Wilkes replied.

The 19-year-old Ravenna man's highly anticipated testimony came during the third day of Thorne's trial.

Thorne could face the death penalty if convicted of complicity to murder.

He is accused of orchestrating Layne's death so he could get custody of their 2-year-old son and avoid court-ordered support payments.

Layne, 26, was found dead in her Alliance home. Her throat had been slashed as four of her five children slept nearby.

Thorne was Wilkes' friend and mentor, helping him learn self-defense techniques in an obscure martial arts form known as shootfighting, prosecutors said.

Although his training was limited to informal sessions held in Thorne's basement, Wilkes said the sport and Thorne's guidance boosted his confidence and made him less fearful in life.

"I saw he feared nothing. I wanted to be just the way he was," Wilkes said.

Wilkes detailed his life and the grisly March 31 murder for nearly three hours.

Under a lengthy cross-examination, Wilkes could not explain why he gave police some wrong information when he confessed more than three months later.

Wilkes said he was high on cocaine and LSD and did not recall pulling Layne's hair or other details until told by police.

He also did not remember flashing the knife or discussing his murder plans with an old schoolmate and the schoolmate's girlfriend.

The couple bumped into Wilkes at the Carnation Mall food court.

Wilkes stayed at the adjacent Comfort Inn that night, using a \$100 bill he says Thorne gave him to pay for the room, the knife and a set of batting gloves he used to cover his hands when he killed Layne.

Wilkes showed little emotion during the questioning. He often held his head at an angle or kept his eyes downward.

He acknowledged a shoplifting arrest, theft, and drug and alcohol use dating as far back as

to when he was 12 or 13.

The high school drop-out said he moved from home to home, often relying on the kindness of others for food and transportation.

He recalled being frequently kicked out of homes for breaking rules or arguing with those he lived with.

He said he had met Layne only a few times and denied having a romantic relationship with her, something the defense had suggested was possible.

Wilkes was sentenced to life in prison following his September conviction for murder. A plea bargain spared him a possible death penalty.

He will be eligible for parole in 30 years.

Wilkes recounted some details about the slashing death. He said he slit Layne's throat as they chatted on her couch.

"She looked as me. I could barely hear her. She said to me, 'Why?' I told her, 'David wanted me to.'"

Thorne pushed the idea when no one was around, Wilkes said.

"He told me he wanted Yvonne Layne out of the picture, as in, he wanted her dead," Wilkes said. "So he could have his son."

"To start out with, I really didn't want nothing to do with it ... He told me I'd have a better life, he'd be able to get me out of here to where I'd have a better life."

That promise, Wilkes said, never was fulfilled.