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Kirkland Shooting Prosecutors Were Harvard Roommates

By Kerry M. Flynn and Hana N. Rouse, CRIMSON STAFF WRITERS

Daniel J. Bennett ’85 and Gerard T. Leone ’85 were roommates in Kirkland House in 1983.

Twenty-eight years later, they are prosecutors in the high-profile murder case of a shooting that took place in the basement of that same House.

Jabrai Jordan Copney allegedly shot Justin Cosby—a Cambridge resident—on May 18, 2009, after a drug deal gone wrong in the basement of Kirkland’s J-entryway.

Bennett, now an assistant district attorney, is serving as the senior prosecutor in Copney’s trial and Leone is the current Middlesex District Attorney.

Assistant District Attorney David M. Solet, another prosecutor in the case, graduated from Harvard Law School in 2001.

Bennett and Leone’s relation to Harvard was brought to the forefront when defense attorney John A. Amabile questioned a former Harvard student involved in the case who took the stand as a witness for the prosecution.

On April 8, Amabile asked the student if, upon agreeing to cooperate, she knew of Bennett’s and Leone’s background and if she had expected that their ties could help her get her diploma when she signed the agreement.

The judge admitted Bennett’s and Leone’s ties to Harvard into evidence after the former student’s testimony, raising the question of whether the prosecution’s Harvard connections will have an impact on Copney’s trial.

“THESE HARVARD ALUMNI”

On June 5, 2009, Chanequa N. Campbell signed an agreement with the District Attorney’s office that allowed her to testify without having the evidence used against her.

Campbell, who was formerly part of the Class of 2009, was friends with Copney’s girlfriend, also a former Harvard student, at the time of the shooting.

In the wake of the incident, Campbell was denied a degree by the College due to her connection with the Kirkland shooting.

Amabile said that as a part of the agreement, signed by Bennett on behalf of Leone, the prosecution may have suggested that Campbell could still earn her degree if she cooperated in the case against Copney.

“She’s thinking that if she comes around, maybe these Harvard alumni will get her reinstated,” Amabile said during his opening statement.

When Amabile questioned Campbell during Copney’s trial, he asked her if she expected that the prosecution’s Harvard ties would help her receive her diploma.

Bennett objected to Amabile’s question and, during a side bar conference, the judge overruled the objection, admitting the two men’s ties to Harvard as evidence in the entire trial.

“Somebody might question whether it would have been appropriate for the district attorney to excuse himself from the case,” Amabile said in a later interview.

PERSONAL TIES

Prosecutors and defense attorneys independent from the case who were interviewed for this article said that the prosecutors’ Harvard connections could become an ethical issue in the trial if their ties to the school cause them to treat the trial differently.

But the lawyers interviewed said that the Harvard connections likely have minimally impacted the case.

“It doesn’t sound like there’s any sort of conflict of interest,” said William Barabino, a criminal defense attorney in Wakefield, Mass. “Because essentially the school is not the defendant.”

Scott D. Bradley, a criminal defense attorney in West Bridgewater, Mass., describes Leone as a person who prioritizes “rules of professional responsibility.”

“They’re all well versed in the law and in the rules of ethics,” Bradley said of prosecutors in the Middlesex Superior Court.

Barabino said that the Harvard ties are not unusual because Harvard graduates often remain in the area.

“It’s just a natural consequence. Someone has to prosecute the crime, and it just happens to be them,” Barabino said.

But lawyers said that the prosecution’s personal ties could affect their enthusiasm in prosecuting the case.

“You might be a little bit motived to just check things over a few extra times and try even harder than you’ve ever tried before because you have that extra motivation,” Bradley said.

“If anything it would be make me particularly zealous about the case,” said Michael K. Bachrach, a New York criminal defense attorney.

MEN OF HARVARD

During their time at Harvard, Bennett and Leone became close friends, according to Robert J. Mazzone ’85, who was roommates with Leone all four years at Harvard.

He said that the two students found a lot of their personal history in common.

Both Bennett and Leone, who played on the Harvard football team, had fathers that were high school football coaches.

When Bennett and Leone attended Harvard, the housing lottery was not randomized and students were allowed to list their preferred Houses.

At the time, Kirkland House was known as “the jock House,” according to Mazzone.

“[Kirkland] was a very fun, very casual place. [Bennett and Leone] loved it,” Mazzone said. “They were very loyal to Kirkland.”

During his four years, Leone juggled academics, football, and boxing while holding a job in order to help pay his tuition.

“Gerry was a kid who was excited to be at Harvard. He worked extremely hard and focused a lot more on schoolwork than most people,” Mazonne said. “He’s always going to give 100 percent.”

With the name of Bennett’s and Leone’s alma mater admitted into evidence, the jury will have the responsibility of interpreting the role of the Harvard connection in the trial.

Closing statements in Copney’s trial are scheduled to take place this week in Middlesex Superior Court.

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