

A cell phone records a fatal stabbing, becomes key evidence at a murder trial

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Ronald Earl Williams reacts Tuesday to a voice mail message left on his wife Mariama Williams' cell phone the night of her stabbing death in 2007. The 4-minute recording is an unusual but key piece of evidence in the St. Petersburg man's first-degree murder trial.



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LARGO — While Ronald Earl Williams was stabbing his wife to death, he unknowingly created a key piece of evidence that could only exist in a wireless age.

Williams somehow activated his cell phone, which then called his wife's cell phone while he was killing her, Assistant State Attorney Walter Manning told a jury on Tuesday.

The voice mail recorded the killing — with Williams threatening to kill his wife, and Mariama Williams screaming in terror — during the attack in their St. Petersburg home.

The recording could help jurors decide whether to convict Ronald Williams of first-degree murder and whether to recommend the death penalty. From the looks on jurors' faces Tuesday, just listening was painful.

Prosecutors referred to the recording in their opening statements Tuesday morning, then called witnesses. The recording was saved for the end of the day.

Williams, 45, knew what was coming. A powerfully built man in khakis and a blue dress shirt, he bowed his shaved head and clasped his hands just before his recorded voice filled the courtroom.

He began by criticizing his wife, threatening her, and saying, "Now I'm going to kill your black a--."

The 12 jurors and two alternates sat in the jury box, expressionless at first. A couple frowned. Meanwhile, about 15 family and friends of Mariama Williams sat in the courtroom gallery, where they had been warned not to display emotions that might influence the jurors.

Then the screams began — loud, long, desperate screams. Mariama Williams screamed for most of the 4-minute recording, and at one point seemed to be pleading "I love you!" There were several loud slapping sounds as Williams stabbed her.

The victim's family members wore stoic expressions at the start, and they did not cry out or comment. But at the end of listening to the 4-minute recording, they looked exhausted. Some hung their heads, or hugged each other for support. Half a dozen left the courtroom afterward.

At that point, one silver-haired juror dabbed her eyes and appeared to fight back tears.

Earlier in the day, attorneys on both sides gave their explanations of how the killing happened.

Ronald and Mariama Williams had been arguing during a brief period in 2007 because he believed she was cheating on him, Assistant Public Defender Kandice Friesen said.

Eventually, during one final argument in their home at 3921 Ninth Ave. S, Mariama Williams, 31, admitted to it, Friesen said.

That's when Williams attacked her. He stabbed her 27 times with a kitchen knife, which he left in her chest, Manning said. An officer said the white rug underneath her turned almost completely red.

Williams later went to his brother's house and admitted "I killed Malo," using her nickname, witnesses said. He took off his blood-soaked shirt and threw it on the floor of his brother's house. He also dropped off his 2-year-old daughter, who had been home at the time of the killing.

He left, but police soon caught him. He told police that he killed her.

After the slaying, the victim's sister, Glenda Bell, found the cell phone in Mariama William's purse and listened to the messages. That's how the recording was discovered.

"That's something you don't want to hear," she said in an interview before the recording was played in court Tuesday. "It's that terrible."

She knew better than anyone that the recording would be hard for her family to listen to but said "we're doing this for my sister, Malo, and to get justice."

The killing, she said, was "something that he didn't have to do... It was a terrible, terrible crime. Stabbed her 27 times. Left a knife in her. What kind of a person would do that?"

Friesen told jurors up front that her client killed his wife. After his wife admitted cheating, she said, "the next thing you know, he snapped. That's all Ronald Williams remembers."

Williams did not have a conscious intention to kill her, so it was not a case of first-degree murder, which requires premeditation, she said.

"He's guilty of killing his wife, but not of premeditation."

It's more than a subtle distinction. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty against Williams on the grounds that his crime was heinous, atrocious and cruel, said Assistant State Attorney Magda McSwain. He could only get the death penalty if convicted of first-degree murder.

If jurors convict him of second degree murder — murder without premeditation — the maximum penalty would be life in prison.

The trial resumes today.

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