

METRO

Grieving Widow's Outburst Jolts Pr. George's Courtroom

She Confronts Suspect, Wails, 'You Killed My Husband!'

By Ruben Castaneda
Washington Post Staff Writer

From her second-row seat in the Upper Marlboro courtroom, Chandra Smith whimpered softly yesterday as a prosecutor told jurors how her husband, an off-duty D.C. police officer, had pleaded for his life before he was shot three times in the head during a robbery last year.

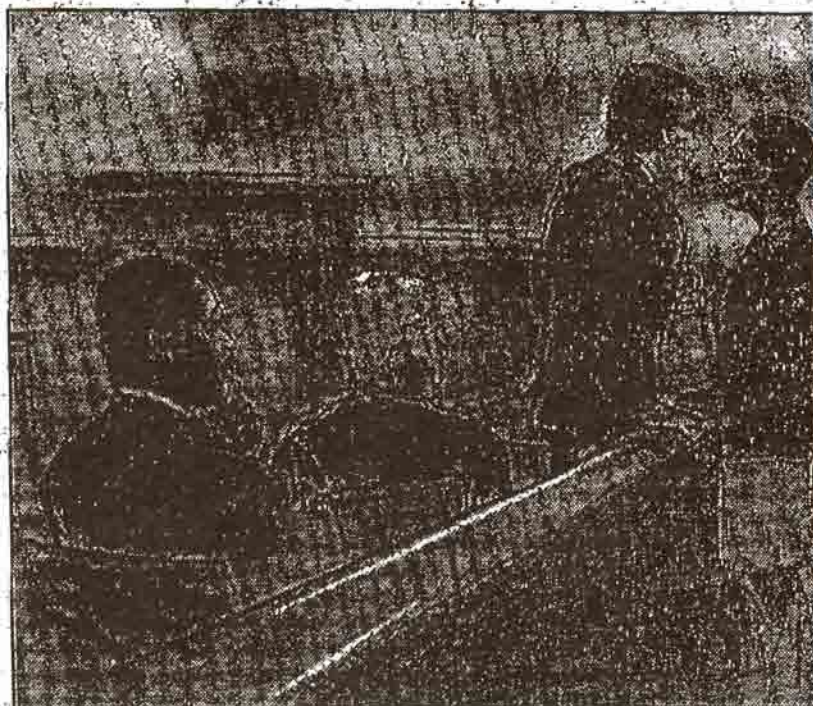
The young widow's whimpers turned into sobs as the Prince George's County prosecutor told the jury that her husband had pleaded: "Please don't shoot me. I have a wife and a kid." Then she bolted from her seat and leaped into the well of the courtroom to confront defendant Donovan Shawn Strickland. "You killed my husband! You killed my husband!" she wailed. "Look at me."

His gaze caught hers, and as her parents and a bailiff rushed to her, Smith, 29, howled through her tears: "My son has no father! My son has no father!"

The jolting display of anger and grief occurred barely two minutes into the opening statements at Strickland's murder trial. Strickland, 29, and two others were charged with killing Oliver Wendell Smith Jr. on Feb. 26 in the parking lot of his Forestville apartment building as the officer, in plain clothes, was returning home from work.

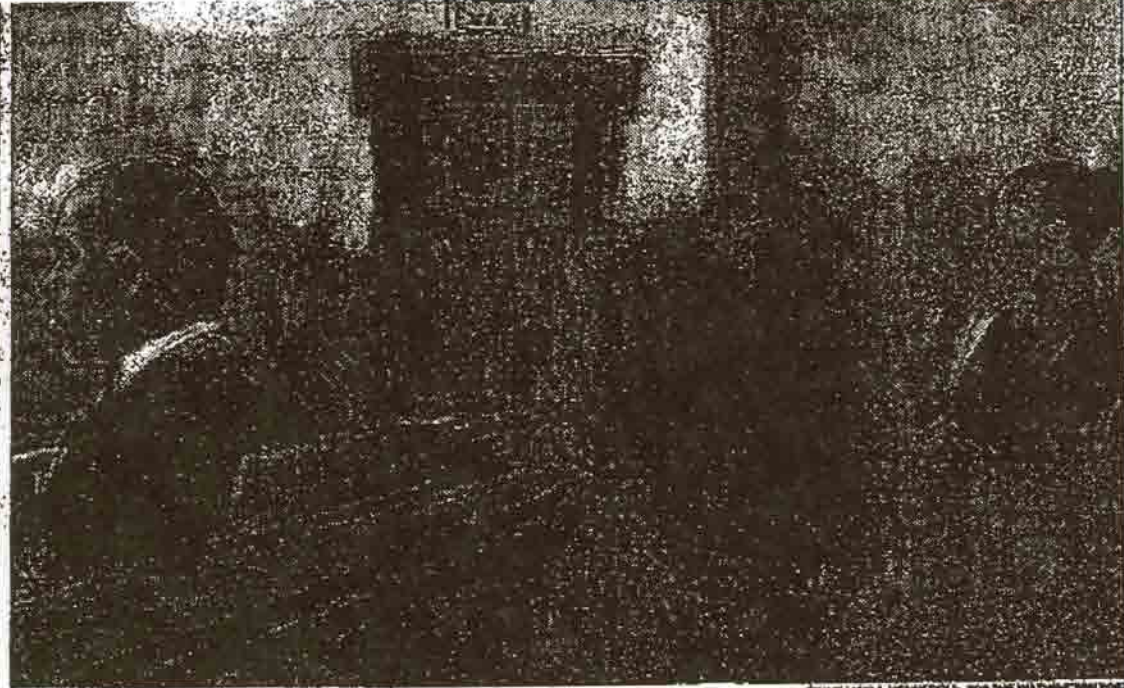
Prosecutors allege that the three men were robbing Smith when one of the assailants opened Smith's wallet and discovered that he was a D.C. police officer. They forced him to the pavement and fired three bullets into the back of his head, prosecutors said.

See **OUTBURST, B6, Col. 2**



BY WILLOM F. HENNESSY A. FOR THE WASHINGTON

Donovan Shawn Strickland, left, and his attorney watch as Assistant State's Attorney William M. Manico tells Chandra Smith, the officer's widow, that she may not stay in the courtroom



BY WILLIAM J. HEINRICH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Chandra Smith sits in second row during trial of Donovan Shawn Strickland, left, who is charged with killing her husband.

'You Killed My Husband!' Widow Cries Out

— OUTBURST, From E1

Anthony Allen Crawley, 39, pleaded guilty to felony murder in September and is awaiting sentencing. Alleged triggerman Antwan Delonta Brown, 24, of Landover, is scheduled to go on trial in March.

Yesterday, after the outburst from the grief-stricken Smith, her parents and the bailiff gently but firmly grabbed her and led her outside the courtroom into a hallway. The defendant dropped his head onto the defense table.

From inside the courtroom, Smith could still be heard sobbing: "He killed my husband! He killed my husband!"

The spasm of grief came as Assistant State's Attorney William M. Manico tried to make his opening statement, and it left many in the packed courtroom in stunned silence.

Strickland's attorney, Michael Blumenthal, asked Prince George's County Circuit Court Judge Richard H. Sothoron Jr. for a mistrial on the grounds that the outburst prejudiced jurors against his client.

Sothoron cleared the courtroom of everyone except the attorneys involved in the case and courtroom workers. He heard from the attorneys, then questioned each of the jurors individually.

After about 90 minutes, Sothoron reopened the courtroom and announced that based on his reading of case law, he was denying the motion for a mistrial. Sothoron said all the jurors had assured him "without hesitation" that Smith's display

"The disruption . . . does not interfere with Mr. Strickland's right to a fair and impartial trial."

— Judge Richard H. Sothoron Jr.

would not affect their ability to be impartial.

Sothoron said that displays of emotion in courtrooms are not unusual and that such scenes do not necessarily entitle a defendant to a mistrial.

"I feel that the disruption in this case does not interfere with Mr. Strickland's right to a fair and impartial trial," Sothoron said. However, the judge excluded Chandra Smith from the courtroom. As a potential prosecution witness, she was not supposed to be in the courtroom yesterday.

In his interrupted opening statement, and in his unimpeded second opening statement, Manico said Strickland admitted to police that he held the gun on Smith while Crawley rifled the officer's pockets.

When Crawley found Smith's badge and police gun, Brown took the gun Strickland was holding, pressed it against the back of Smith's head and shot the officer three times, Manico said.

Strickland can be found guilty of murder in a slaying that occurred during a felony, in this case armed robbery, that he took part in, Manico said. Strickland would face life in prison if convicted of felony murder.

In his opening statement, defense attorney Blumenthal acknowledged that Strickland was guilty of robbery with a deadly weapon and of using a handgun in the commission of a crime of violence—acts for which he could be sentenced to a maximum of 20 years in prison.

But Blumenthal argued that Brown, not Strickland, should be held accountable for Smith's slaying.

"I ask you to return a verdict that requires Donnie Strickland to answer for what Donnie Strickland did," Blumenthal said. "Leave for another day, another jury, the actions of Antwan Brown."