

Trial begins Tuesday in Veishea stabbing

Lawyers for Michael Ron Runyan, accused in the death of 'Uri' Sellers, may argue that their client acted in self-defense.

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Nevada, Ia. — The actions of Harold "Uri" Sellers may be as much on trial here this week as those of the man accused of killing him.

Lawyers for Michael Ron Runyan, 20, have indicated in court documents they intend to claim Runyan was acting in self-defense when he stabbed Sellers, 19, of Monroe as Iowa State University's Veishea celebration was winding down April 20.

Sellers' death threw the future of the 75-year-old event into doubt.

Runyan is scheduled to go on trial for first-degree murder Tuesday in Story County District Court. Luke Joseph Abrams, 18, who accompanied Runyan last April, is expected to testify for the prosecution in exchange for being allowed to plead guilty to reduced charges.

Admission

Lawyers are unlikely to dispute that Runyan stabbed Sellers. Court documents indicate that, almost immediately after turning himself in to police April 25, Runyan admitted to stabbing Sellers. In an interview with police, Runyan "explains that he acted in self-defense," court documents say.

Court documents indicate Runyan also told police where to find the knife used in the crime. Police knew Sellers' assailant had discarded the 5-inch to 6-inch knife while running from a fraternity house, but it wasn't found until a few hours after Runyan was arrested.

Sellers, a Des Moines Area Community College student, was visiting friends at the fraternity house on the night of April 19 and the morning of

April 20. Friends said he was considering transferring to ISU and pledging to the Theta Chi fraternity, whose members were staying at the Adelante fraternity house while their burned-out house was rebuilt.

Police said Sellers and others at the party may have had a disagreement with some people in the yard about 2:30 a.m. April 20. The people apparently left, then returned with a knife a few minutes later, police said.

Witnesses told police the assailant took a swing at another reveler, Matt Teeter of Keosauqua, then stabbed Sellers once in the chest. Teeter and Sellers gave chase as the assailant and another man fled, they said.

Sellers gave up the chase after a short distance, then staggered back to the Adelante lawn and collapsed. An autopsy found that the knife had cut the main artery carrying blood from his heart.

The autopsy also found that Sellers was drunk at the time of his death, something defense lawyers Julia Keifer and Frank Rivera are likely to bring up as they try to establish that Runyan's actions were justifiable.

Lawyers' Requests

Keifer and Rivera have asked District Judge Timothy Finn to keep testimony about Sellers' general character out of the trial to avoid having witnesses portray him as a peaceful man. They've also asked Finn to keep out most photos from the autopsy on Sellers' body.

Prosecutors, in turn, have asked Finn to exclude any testimony about Sellers' reputation for violence or aggression, and any testimony about Runyan's reputation as a peaceful person.

Keifer did not return telephone messages seeking information on the case. Story County Attorney Mary Richards said she would not comment on trial strategy and tactics. Sellers' father, William Sellers of Monroe, did not return a telephone call.



Runyan
On trial



Sellers
Slain

Runyan and Abrams apparently were part of a group of Fort Dodge youths who were attracted to Ames by the parties surrounding Veishea. A jacket bearing a logo for Jensen Builders of Fort Dodge led police to Runyan.

Faces Seven Years

Abrams was charged with aiding and abetting first-degree murder, but pleaded guilty Aug. 8 to going armed with intent and being an accessory after the fact. He faces a maximum prison term of seven years when he's sentenced Oct. 13, said his lawyer, William Habhab of Fort Dodge.

Deciding to plead guilty was a tough decision, Habhab said. Abrams "had some very good things going for him. I think the evidence showed that he was not complicit in the death." In fact, Habhab said, Abrams may have done things to lessen the severity of the incident. He would not be more specific.

The slaying has cast doubt on the future of Veishea, an event already suffering from a party image caused by student riots in 1988, 1992 and 1994. This fall, ISU President Martin Jischke told student organizations Veishea would be canceled unless they voted to ban alcohol from the event.

Jischke had scheduled a public forum on Veishea for today, but moved that to Friday when Richards said she feared publicity from the forum would interfere with jury selection.