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## Guilty verdict in Coatesville revenge slaying

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WEST CHESTER - A Coatesville man who authorities said shot and killed a fellow city man who he believed had tried to break into his home was found guilty Friday of first-degree murder after a week-long trial in Common Pleas Court.

Dante Lawrence, 30, now faces a mandatory life sentence in state prison for the January 2010 death of 31-year-old Randy Maurice Vaughn, who was shot repeatedly in the 200 block of East Diamond Street in Coatesville.

The jury of eight women and four men deliberated about four hours before returning with a unanimous verdict. Lawrence, a convicted felon, was also found guilty of possessing a firearm, which could carry an additional prison term. He will be sentenced later, according to Senior Judge Thomas Gavin, who presided over the trial.

The case pitted conflicting versions of who had shot and killed Vaughn. The prosecution said a longtime friend of Lawrence's had fingered him as the assailant, while the defense contended that same friend had pulled the trigger and sent Vaughn to his demise.

The jury rejected the defense's version of events and found Lawrence had been the culprit.

'We are happy with the verdict and will reserve further comment until later,' said the lead prosecutor, Assistant District Attorney Carlos Barraza.

Members of Vaughn's family were in the courtroom when the verdict was read and will have an opportunity to tell Gavin about the impact their loved one's death has had on them when he is sentenced.

Vaughn was shot about 9:30 p.m. on Jan 5, 2010. In April 2010, investigators, including Chester County Detective Frank Martin and former Coatesville Police Detective Gerald Pawling, identified Lawrence as the prime suspect after a witness said she had suspicions that Lawrence was involved in Vaughn's death. He was arrested after fleeing to Atlanta, Ga., where he was picked up living under an assumed name.

The murder occurred after a trio of men reportedly attempted to break into Lawrence's home on Chester Avenue on the evening of the murder. He saw the men and later asked old friend, Shamaur Hall, to help him find the would-be intruders. Hall testified that he saw a man fitting the description of one burglar in the Midway Bar in Coatesville and told his friend. The two then began searching for him while in Hall's SUV.

According to the prosecution, the two men happened upon Vaughn, who fit the description of one of the burglars, later that night. And Lawrence, who had armed himself with a gun after the break-in attempt, shot him as many as five times, killing him.

The defense, however, said Hall had been the shooter and afterward blamed Lawrence because he was afraid to go to prison for the crime.

In his closing arguments to the jury, Barraza asked the panel to consider who had the motive, means and opportunity to commit the murder. It was Lawrence, not Hall, he said.

'Only one of two people had the motive,' Barraza said. 'Shamaur Hall had no motive to do anything that night. It wasn't his house. It was his gun. He wasn't upset. That was the defendant.'

Barraza said the difference between Hall's story of Lawrence's complicity and Lawrence's 'very well scripted' account was that Hall's testimony was corroborated by evidence found at the murder site and testimony from Lawrence's girlfriend, Shanita Johnson, who saw him with a gun that night and said he was furious over the break-in attempt, and from Johnson's friend Carlita Small, who testified that Johnson was concerned that Lawrence would do something stupid to avenge the attempt.

'There is not a single shred of evidence to corroborate what (Lawrence) said,' Barraza argued.

But Lawrence's defense attorney urged the jury to reject that claim and instead focus on Hall as the shooter.

'Dante Lawrence did not commit this crime,' said defense attorney Michael Skinner of West Chester. 'The person who should be sitting (at the defense table) is Shamaur Hall. It was Shamaur who went to look for this fellow. He got the face to match the jacket' and fired the fatal shots.

Skinner asked the jurors to consider what Hall's intentions had been when he and Lawrence went looking for the people who had tried to break into Lawrence's apartment.

'Is he just going to drive (Lawrence) around all night and then let Dante rough someone up? Did he drive all the way from his house just to do that? Why would you go through all that trouble just to sit in the car?' Skinner asked.

Skinner reminded the jury that Hall had lied to police in separate interviews when he was first approached by investigators and had given inconsistent testimony that did not match his earlier statements to police.

He suggested Hall had pointed the finger at Lawrence to avoid being charged with the crime himself.

In his closing statement, Barraza asked the jurors to remember the man who was central to the case but who was hardly mentioned - Vaughn.

'Randy Vaughn is dead because the defendant shot him,' Barraza said. 'He will no longer be a son to his mother. He will no longer be a nephew to his loving aunt. Randy Vaughn will never see the light of day again. Randy Vaughn is entitled justice.'

Lawrence has been in custody since his arrest in August 2010 and was returned to Chester County Prison after the verdict Friday to await sentencing.

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## Michael P. Rellahan

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Michael P. Rellahan has been a staff reporter and editor at the Daily Local News since 1982. He has covered all kinds of news over the years but is now assigned to report on court and legal news, as well as Chester County government news and politics.

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