

# COPS DON'T SEE LINK TO CLARK CASE IN SHOOTING DEATH OF WITNESS

By **Abdon M. Pallasch**, Tribune Staff Writer

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**M**ichael Cutler was home from college for the summer, enjoying a warm night out visiting with friends in a quiet Austin neighborhood on the West Side.

A 6-foot, blond college football player, the 19-year-old had been scheduled to testify in July as a witness to the brutal beating of Lenard Clark on the South Side last year.

At about 12:30 a.m. Friday, Cutler was sitting by himself in a car parked in a driveway on the 5900 block of West Erie Street. Two men dressed in black, one wearing a mask from the bridge of his nose down, approached Cutler, according to police, in an apparent robbery attempt and then shot him.

While suspicions were raised that the shooting was intended to keep Cutler from testifying, police Sunday said they believe Cutler's role as a witness played no part.

"It looks like an attempted robbery," said a detective on the case.

Added police spokesman Kevin Morison, "There's nothing to indicate that his homicide was at all connected with his involvement as a witness in any other criminal case."

Exactly what transpired after the men approached Cutler is unclear because two friends who were outside with Cutler at the time fled inside after the two assailants demanded money from them.

According to the mother of one of the friends, her son threw his wallet to them and ran inside the house with his girlfriend. They heard a gunshot and came outside to find Cutler lying on the cement next to the car with a gunshot wound to his chest, said the woman, who did not want to be identified.

Cutler's death leaves prosecutors with just two key witnesses who are expected to testify during the trial of the three young men accused of beating Clark.

Bob Benjamin, a spokesman for the Cook County state's attorney's office, refused to comment on how the loss of Cutler would impact the state's case or whether the case would continue with two of the three witnesses.

An attorney for one of the three defendants said he thinks the shooting was nothing more than robbery-related.

Joseph Lopez, attorney for defendant Victor Jasas, said that because Cutler had changed his story during the investigation, his testimony may have hurt the prosecution's case.

"I know (the trial) had nothing to do with this," Lopez said.

"It certainly didn't come from our side--we wanted him on the stand."

Cutler's family agreed the shooting was random and had nothing to do with the trial.

"He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," said Diane Cutler, an aunt. "It had nothing to do with the Lenard Clark beating."

Michael Cutler had lettered in football at De La Salle Institute, Diane Cutler said.

"He was a good kid--I coached him," said Jim Grannan, De La Salle football coach.

Cutler had just finished the semester at the Kentucky college he attends on a football scholarship, his aunt said. He was planning to transfer to a college in Illinois over the summer, she said.

"He was home to work and support himself so he could put himself through college," she said.

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