



Lawyers to wrap up cases in McGuire murder trial

After 6 weeks, jury to hear closing statements Monday

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NEW BRUNSWICK — There is one more task for the attorneys in the case of State of New Jersey v. Melanie McGuire. Monday they will argue.

Nearly three years ago William and Melanie McGuire had a dispute in their Woodbridge apartment, in the overnight period of April 28 and 29 in 2004.

What happened next has been the subject of a six-week murder trial.

Did William T. McGuire pack his bags and leave, only to be murdered elsewhere by unknown persons? Or did Melanie McGuire kill him with a .38 caliber weapon she had purchased two days earlier?

One week later, a suitcase with his body parts was found in the Chesapeake Bay. Within the next two weeks, two more suitcases were found.

The classic question to this murder mystery is, Whodunit?

Assistant Attorney General Patricia Prezioso will argue Monday that Melanie McGuire was at fault.

McGuire's attorney, Joseph Tacopina, will seek to convince the jury she is not guilty.

Tacopina cannot wait.

"It's the most fun part of my job," he said last week, looking forward to making his closing argument.

Asked how long he's been crafting the closing argument he said, "I started putting it together a year ago. . . . I'm chomping at the bit."

Tacopina expects to address the jury for about 90 minutes Monday.

Prezioso made it clear she is just as eager to give her closing argument Monday. But

— yielding to the instructions of Superior Court Judge Frederick DeVesa, who requested the attorneys not speak to the media — she asked not to be quoted.

Were this an oratory contest, it would be no contest.

Tacopina is a media star, featured last month in Gentleman's Quarterly. On his Web site he includes tributes from such publications as USA Today and The New York Times.

"Joe's strength is his uncanny ability to connect with people," said Rosemarie Arnold of Fort Lee, who shares a law office with Tacopina in New York.

During the six-week trial, whenever there was laughter in the courtroom it was typically something Tacopina said or did.

A sense of humor at the right time does not hurt, said defense attorney Rocco Cipparone Jr., a former federal prosecutor and adjunct professor at Rutgers University Law School in Camden.

"Jurors tend to identify with the lawyers," Cipparone said. "But as the stakes get higher, personality matters less than the quality of the evidence."

Absent a confession, an eyewitness and the proverbial smoking gun, the state has built a case based on circumstantial evidence.

Among its strongest evidence are plastic garbage bags found with the body parts that match plastic bags used by Melanie McGuire when she gave away her 39-year-old husband's clothing.

Frank Ruiz, the state's expert, testified in the fifth week of the trial they were a close match.

Sally Ginter, a retired chemist, watching Ruiz testimony on Court TV at her home in Michigan, observed what Ruiz was saying, and disagreed with his conclusions.

"I was outraged by (Ruiz') results," she said Thursday, after the defense arranged for her to come from Michigan to testify.

That day, on the final day of testimony, Ruiz was flown in from Dallas by the state, and concluded his second appearance in the witness box with his firm opinion: "In my expert opinion, the bags matched. Case closed."

Other circumstantial evidence includes Melanie McGuire's purchase of a .38 caliber gun two days before her husband's disappearance. The cause of death, according to testimony from Virginia authorities, were wounds from .38 caliber bullets.

Evidence also includes grainy surveillance photos, a DNA analysis of small bits of human tissue found on the floor of William McGuire's car, the purchase of a powerful sedative on the morning of Aug. 28, 2004, and an inspection of the McGuires' home computer, revealing Internet searches on such topics as "how to commit murder."

"What the state has to do is convince the jury all the pieces fit together nicely so there's no room for reasonable doubt," said Cipparone of Prezioso's task.

Prezioso earned her spurs in the office of the Manhattan District Attorney, where she closed cases for 14 years.

Asked to describe her ability to present a closing argument, a spokeswoman for the Manhattan DA's office, citing office policy about speaking to the media, limited her praise to saying Prezioso was "an extremely capable and highly regarded trial attorney."

If convicted of murder and related charges, the 34-year-old McGuire, who has been free on \$2.1 million bail, faces up to 50 years in prison.