

The New York Times

AP EXCLUSIVE: Suge Knight's Defense In Murder Case Previewed

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LOS ANGELES — Jun 28, 2016



Toi-Lin Kelly has known Marion "Suge" Knight for 11 years, and says the former rap music mogul is nothing like the fearsome reputation associated with him from his heyday at the helm of the influential gangster rap label Death Row Records.

Knight, jailed on murder and attempted murder charges after he ran over two men with his pickup truck last year, is a caring father and devoted family man, who at age 51 remains a "momma's boy," says Kelly, who's engaged to Knight and has a 6-year-old son with him.

"People forget that he's human, and he has people who love him and has a family and a lot of people who root for him," she told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview alongside Knight's new legal team, **J. Tooson** and **Jeremy Lessem**. Knight himself is not permitted to speak publicly.

The session, held recently at the attorneys' suburban offices, offered a preview of their defense of the former mogul, including a detailed account of the time leading up to a violent confrontation that ended when Knight ran over the two men, killing one, outside a Compton burger stand in January 2015.

It is the latest allegation of violence against Knight, a two-time convicted felon and inextricably linked to the violence of the 1990s rap scene.

Knight faces up to life in prison if convicted in the murder case, but Tooson and Lessem say he was fleeing an ambush and didn't realize until later that he had run over and killed Terry Carter, a Compton businessman who was attempting to resolve a dispute between Knight and the makers of "Straight Outta Compton." The attorneys say Knight was expecting to have a meeting with Carter about receiving payment for the use of his likeness in last year's highly successful biopic of the pioneering gangster rap group N.W.A.

Kelly says Knight had no idea there would be trouble, and planned to join her and their son at an arcade restaurant to play video games after meeting with Carter. She says Knight was extremely close to his son, taking him to school each day and helping him play with a new scooter before heading to Compton that fateful day.

Upon arrival, Knight was confronted by several armed men at Tam's Burgers, where he was supposed to meet Carter, the lawyers say. He was attacked by Cle "Bone" Sloan, a technical adviser on the N.W.A film who survived being run over by Knight's pickup. Knight heard some of the men shouting orders about how they were going to kill him, Tooson says.

Fresh in Knight's mind was an August 2014 nightclub shooting that left him severely injured with seven bullet wounds, the attorneys say. On Monday, he sued singer Chris Brown and the club's owners, blaming them for lax security.

"What's going on in Mr. Knight's mind is, 'Wow, I'm in no position to run,'" Tooson said. "I'm still recovering from being shot five months ago."

After running over Carter and Sloan, a key prosecution witness who's admitted he was hitting Knight through the window of his pickup, Knight left the scene and later turned himself in to authorities. His attorneys say Knight willingly spoke to detectives because he believed he was the victim.

"Mr. Knight saw himself as a victim and he went in to cooperate with law enforcement to clear up the situation, to explain to them what happened," Lessem said.

The pretrial phase of Knight's murder case has been marked by repeated health issues for the former mogul. He passed out several times at the courthouse and had to be taken by ambulance for treatment. While some have speculated Knight was faking, Kelly says the episodes were due to complications from the shooting and problems with medications to treat diabetes and a blood clot.

"I think people have this perception of him that he's this monster that wakes up every morning looking for trouble," she said. "That's exactly who he isn't. I think his nickname, Sugar Bear ... describes him perfectly."

Prosecutors portray Knight differently. In a motion filed soon after Knight's arrest, prosecutors described several incidents in which they say he assaulted people, intimidated witnesses and ran an extortion scheme against out-of-town rappers working in Los Angeles.

Knight's attorney at the time pointed out his client had never been charged with those allegations.

Knight's Death Row Records label fueled gangster rap's popularity in the 1990s, with an artist roster that included Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur and Snoop Dogg before he lost control of the company after it was forced into bankruptcy.

He pleaded no contest in 1995 and was sentenced to five years' probation for assaulting two rappers in 1992. In 1997, he was sentenced to prison for violating his probation by taking part in a fight at a Las Vegas hotel hours before Shakur was fatally wounded in a drive-by attack nearby as he rode in Knight's car.

Tooson and Lessem are the fifth set of attorneys to represent Knight in the murder case. They say much work needs to be done before it goes to trial early next year, including commissioning an enhancement of a widely circulated surveillance video that shows Knight running over the men.

"There's a lot of unanswered questions in this case," Tooson said, noting that 14 minutes elapsed between when Sloan and Carter were injured and when 911 was called. "They needed to clean up the scene and remove the weapons," he said.

District Attorney's spokeswoman Jane Robison declined comment.

Kelly, who is not represented by Tooson and Lessem, would not comment on the murder case, but she fully expects Knight will be exonerated.

"I'm now raising our son and trying to explain to him that, you know, 'Daddy didn't do anything wrong,'" she said. "It's hard because I'd like to know that my son has belief in the justice system and how it works."



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