

Days before she died in jail, Nimali Henry told sister, 'I'm getting really, really sick'

Heather Nolan, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

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Nimali Henry, 19, was found unresponsive on April 1, 2014, on the floor of an isolation cell in the St. Bernard Parish jail. Three former correctional officers charged in her death are on trial this week in federal court.

Deshawna Henry thought she was taking steps in the right direction when she told the St. Bernard Parish Prison staff in 2014 her sister could die if she didn't get medication for a rare blood disorder, and again when she made plans to deliver the medication to the jail during visiting hours.

Deshawna Henry visited Nimali Henry on March 24, 2014, and talked to her on the phone in the following days. Nimali Henry was heard in recorded conversations played for a jury in federal court Wednesday (Nov. 7) telling her sister, "I'm getting really, really, really sick."

Nimali Henry would never leave jail. She was found dead inside an isolation cell in the St. Bernard Parish Prison on April 1, 2014, roughly 10 days after she was booked. A coroner's report said she likely died of a blood clot.



“We thought we had more time,” Deshawna Henry said Wednesday of her and her family’s attempts to get Nimali her medicine. “By letting them know she was sick, I felt I did my job.”

Three former correctional officers charged with deprivation of rights under color of law for failing to provide Henry with proper medication and treatment while she was in jail are on trial this week in federal court, where Deshawna Henry spoke Wednesday from a witness stand about her sister.

The officers, former captain and medical officer Andre Dominick, and former deputies Debra Becnel and Lisa Vaccarella also are accused of lying to FBI agents in interviews during their investigation into Henry’s death.

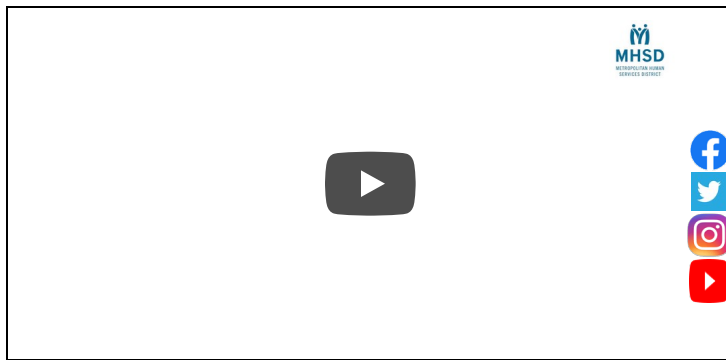
Timothy Williams, a former corporal, pleaded guilty in September to the same charges. He is scheduled to be sentenced Jan. 16.

U.S. District Judge Ivan L.R. Lemelle is presiding over the trial, which began Monday.

Deshawna Henry was a nursing student at Nunez Community College at the time her sister was arrested, and didn’t have a car. She rode her bicycle to visit Nimali Henry in jail on March 24, then rode to school to print paperwork someone at Ochsner told her she needed Nimali to sign so they could release her medical records.

Deshawna Henry said she rode her bicycle back to jail, where a deputy got Nimali’s signature on the papers. She rode back to school and tried to fax the papers to Ochsner, but said she never received confirmation from the hospital.

Two or three days later, Deshawna Henry said she got her sister’s medication and planned to bring it to the jail during visiting hours Friday, March 28. It was storming that day and streets were flooding, and Deshawna Henry said she couldn’t get to the jail on her bicycle.



Four days later, Deshawna Henry said she got a call from a St. Bernard Parish Sheriff's Office investigator, who wanted to meet her at school. He told her Nimali died, she said.

Nimali Henry suffered from thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura, or TTP, a rare blood disorder that causes clots to form in small blood vessels around the body. The condition was life-threatening and required regular medication.

Bernardita Voss, who spent several days in a St. Bernard Parish Prison dorm with Henry, testified Wednesday the 19-year-old told "everybody" – including prison staff -- she had a serious medical condition and would die without her medication.

Voss said Henry appeared physically fine when she first arrived in jail, but "she kept declining" as the days passed.

Her testimony echoed that of two other women who were in jail with Henry in 2014, who said Henry got visibly weaker each day until she died.

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Nimali Henry became visibly frail in days before death, former inmates say

Voss said Henry spent her last night in jail in an isolation cell, which shares a wall with the dorm the other women were housed in. She heard Henry moaning all night, Voss said, and eventually put on headphones because she couldn't bear to listen.

Voss said the moaning stopped sometime between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m., and she and the other women in the dorm assumed Henry was doing better. A couple hours later when the guards did a head count, Voss said Henry didn't respond when her name was called.

The women then learned Henry died, Voss said.

Under cross examination from Becnel's defense attorney, Guy Wall, Voss said inmates commonly had trouble getting medication from jail staff.



Voss said once while she was in jail in St. Bernard, she had her husband go to the pharmacy for her and bring her medicine to jail.

Another time, Voss said she requested medicine for a sinus problem. Jail staff brought her the medicine four weeks later, after she'd already gotten better.

The trial is expected to resume Thursday.

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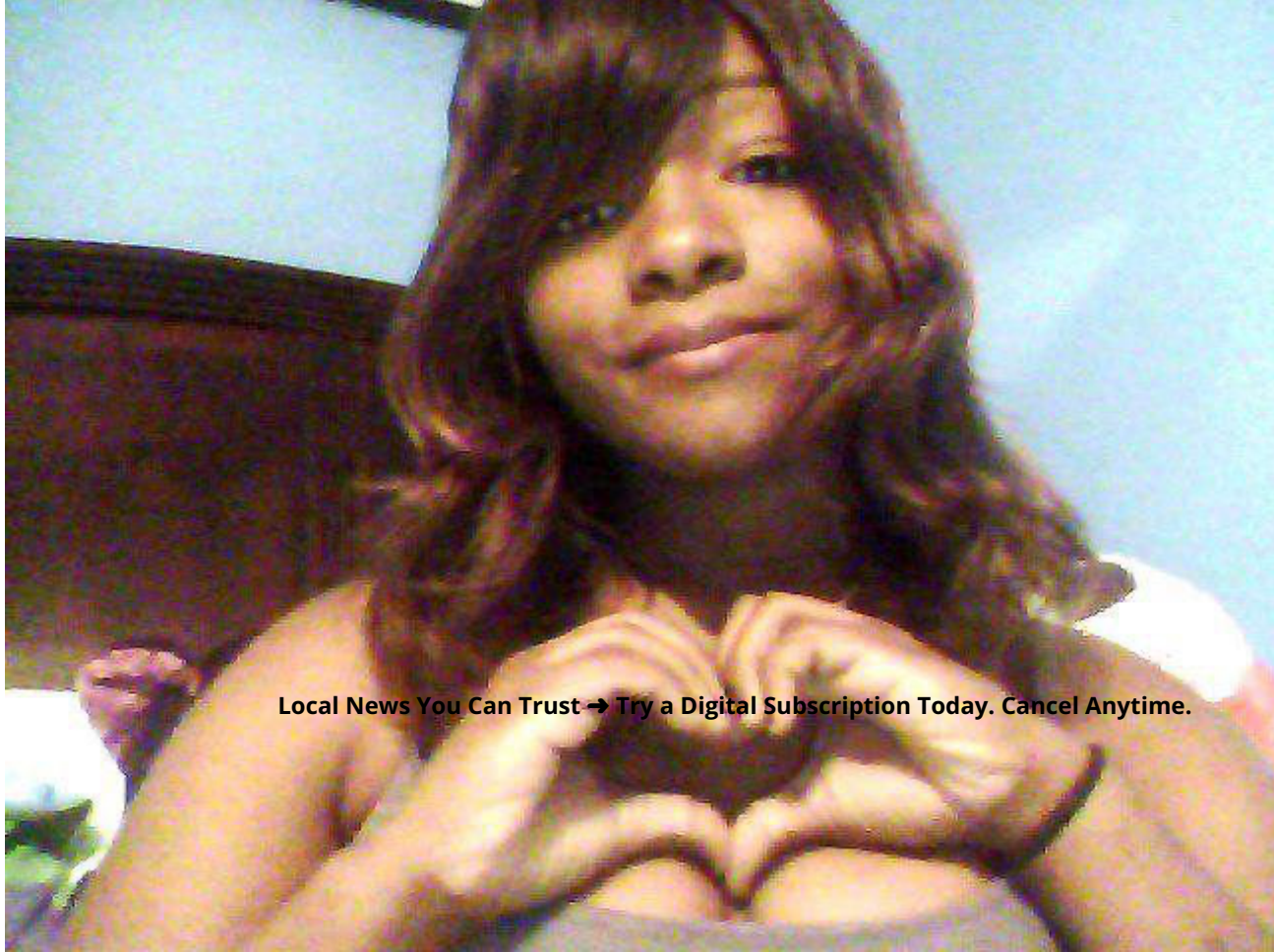
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St. Bernard officers get years in prison for Nimali Henry's death are now the repercussions'

BY MATT SLEDGE | STAFF WRITER

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Photo of Nimali Henry, provided by her sister Deshawna Henry.

Matt Sledge

Dejongh Henry told a federal judge Thursday he wasn't planning to speak at the sentencing of two jail guards who admitted to playing a role in his sister's death at the St. Bernard lock-up in 2014.

But after relatives of the guards stood up and told the judge the men deserved mercy, something moved him.

Nimali Henry, the sister closest to him in age, the one he'd looked up to his entire life, died behind bars after begging for help as her body broke down from a rare blood disorder. She left behind a 4-month-old daughter.

The family has yet to find peace, Henry said.

"She was a proud woman and a proud mother, and you took everything away from her," Henry said. "There are no sob stories that will satisfy our ears. These are now the repercussions."

After hours of testimony and legal argument Thursday, U.S. District Judge Ivan Lemelle sentenced former Captain Andre Dominick and Corporal Timothy Williams to years behind bars. Both pleaded guilty to deprivation of civil rights under color of law.

Dominick got 60 months in prison with credit for time served. He has been in jail since he shot himself during a trial in November 2018, so he faces a maximum 32 months more. Williams was sentenced to 57 months.



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Henry's relatives said they had waited to see justice served for a long time, after the hearing was delayed by Dominick's self-inflicted injury and the coronavirus pandemic. But they -- and the judge -- still had questions about why the young mother died.

Henry, 19, died alone in a cell on April 1, 2014, 10 days after her arrest in a minor domestic dispute. Her death attracted little notice at first. The coroner said she had died of natural causes.

FBI agents -- who had to cut through a web of lies from jail guards -- used video surveillance and fellow inmates' statements to piece together a damning timeline. Henry and her family had pleaded with jail officials for life-saving medication to treat her blood disorder, called thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura (TTP).

Despite the warnings, Dominick, Williams and two other guards sentenced Wednesday did little to help her, even as she writhed in agony and her fellow inmates tried to alert guards that something was seriously wrong with her.

Unlike the guards sentenced Wednesday, both officials had the authority under Sheriff's Office regulations to call an ambulance.

Dominick, an EMT and the highest-ranking jail official charged in the case, was doing double duty as the jail's juvenile chief and acting medical officer at the time of Henry's death.

A state employee told Dominick on March 26 that Henry was ill and in need of medication for TTP. Henry herself wrote on a jail form that a doctor had told her there was a "90% chance she would die" without treatment. But Dominick failed to order medicine for Henry or arrange for her to meet with a doctor who came to the jail on March 29.

Williams admitted that Henry and several other inmates told him she was seriously ill with a life-threatening condition and needed treatment. But he told the inmates to stop requesting help. He placed Henry in an isolation cell, knowing that it might discourage her from making more complaints. He observed her deterioration over a period of days, and at one point "mocked and ridiculed" Henry for falling down on the ground.

Lemelle said he still didn't understand why Henry's cries for help were ignored, and he hoped that the former corrections officers would be willing to meet with Henry's family to speak about what happened if requested.



Two former St. Bernard jail guards sentenced to prison in 19-year-old Nimali Henry's death

Dominick said that while he took responsibility for “most of it,” he still couldn’t fully explain why Henry was allowed to languish and die.

“I can ask for forgiveness all day long, and I know that I don’t deserve it. Because I can’t imagine what they’re going through,” he said. “Especially the little girl, who will never know what it is to have her mother. And that weighs heavily. It weighs very heavily.”

Since Henry’s death, Dominick’s wife died, he suffered a heart attack in jail and other ailments have befallen him -- diabetes, kidney failure and neuropathy.

Williams’ wife described her husband as a devoted Christian and a gentle man who showers love on his two daughters.

But their pleas for lenience provoked dismissive responses from the Henry family, who noted that Nimali Henry was still in high school at the time of her death.

“I hear Mr. Williams has two daughters. Yes, that’s great,” said Kerwin Walters, Henry’s uncle. “That little girl should remind you of your daughters when dealing with her. There’s no way this should happen.”

Several relatives said they haven’t been able to spend time with Nimali Henry’s 7-year-old child, Nilijah Connors, because she is in the care of her paternal grandparents. Lemelle said he hoped that there would ultimately be “some sharing in the life of that child.”

Meanwhile, the judge urged prosecutors to present evidence to a grand jury of misconduct among higher-ranking officials at the jail, if they had uncovered it during the course of the case.

Lemelle also wondered aloud why the St. Bernard Parish jail isn’t under a federal consent decree like the Orleans Parish Sheriff’s Office.

Defense attorneys said over the two days of sentencing that the problems in St. Bernard went well beyond their clients. Assistant Federal Public Defender Jerrod Thompson-Hicks noted that there at least two other inmates have died in the jail since Henry.

“There is a systemic problem there, and it would have taken, on some level, an extraordinary person to stand up to the culture at the jail,” Thompson-Hicks said.

St. Bernard Parish Sheriff James Pohlmann’s office declined to comment on the sentencing, citing a pending civil court lawsuit filed on behalf of Connors.

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