

Four teens held in death of homeless man

They are charged with killing John Anthony Smith, whose base was a park bench and who was beloved by friends

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John Anthony Smith

John Anthony Smith, a homeless man who walked with a cane and was quick with a hello, waved away a friend one night in August. He wouldn't come inside, he told her, and he stretched out to sleep on the Camden park bench he ruled.

Smith, 54, was well known in the neighborhood near the Pennsauken border. From a little park in the 3900 block of Federal Street - just down from the recently completed house that will be featured on the television show *Extreme Home Makeover* next month - Smith would ask his friends for a dollar or two, share a beer, and talk endlessly about sports, politics, neighborhood gossip, whatever.

The woman who had vainly tried to persuade Smith to sleep indoors that night returned to the park as paramedics were leaving. Attackers had mercilessly beat him with their fists, feet and a stick, authorities said.

That night, just before Smith lapsed into an 18-day coma, he told authorities he had been beaten by four male assailants. He died at Cooper University Hospital on Sept. 17 without ever regaining consciousness.

Yesterday, as a fourth teen suspect surrendered and all four youths - ages 15 to 17 - appeared in juvenile court on murder charges, the motive for the Aug. 30 fatal beating remained a mystery.

Smith's health was poor, his friends said, and he wasn't much for fighting. He never had more than a few dollars in his pockets, and his attackers did not rob him. Nobody who knew him could imagine an enemy.

"The streets are rough and unforgiving," said Mark Salzburg, a homeless man who said he had known Smith for many years.

"They beat him to hurt him and to make some kind of a statement," he said. "He wore a gold chain and a watch, but they weren't stolen."

Salzburg added: "He'll be greatly missed. He was a good guy. He never hurt anybody."

Other denizens of the park wondered whether the attackers had been high on drugs or trying to prove themselves. But they couldn't imagine a more defenseless victim.

"He was in no shape to fight anybody," said Edith Coward, 52, of Pennsauken, who said she had known Smith for about three years.

"We'd talk for hours sometimes. He loved to talk," she said.

She said she was stunned when she heard about the attack.

"I was numb, just numb," she said. "I'm afraid. I'm scared."

All four high school students who are accused in the killing were held at the Camden County Youth Detention Center. Three are from Pennsauken and one is from Camden. Two have lengthy arrest records, authorities said.

Jason Laughlin, spokesman for the Camden County Prosecutor's Office, said robbery had been ruled out as a motive. He declined to speculate why the teens would deliver such a beating to a homeless man.

Joanne Hazleton, who works at the nearby Mister Meat butcher shop, said the crime left many people in the neighborhood heartbroken.

"He was a great friend. He will be sadly missed for his wisdom, proudness, stubbornness and the many things he shared with us. Everyone loved him, employees, customers, everyone," she said.

Neighbors held a memorial service for Smith, who also was known as John Lester, last week and chipped in to pay for a funeral that was to be held today.

Assistant County Prosecutor Tim Chatten said in juvenile court yesterday that he might seek adult trials for the four defendants, whose names were withheld because of their ages. If convicted as adults, they would face life imprisonment - 30 years without parole.

Chatten said one of the four had confessed and implicated the others. Also, an eyewitness who was with the group that night has told authorities the victim "stood up and the four males beat him with hands, feet and a stick," the prosecutor said.

The mother of a 15-year-old youth charged in the crime said she told authorities that one of the other suspects told her: "I hurt someone real bad and I think I killed him."

Chatten said detectives were also investigating another attack that was carried out in the park earlier on the night Smith was beaten. That victim also was beaten by a band of teens but survived, he said.

Two of the jailed teens have a history of trouble.

One, 15, of Pennsauken, has convictions dating back to when he was 10. The prosecutor said the boy was convicted of aggravated assault in 2002 and arson in 2004. Robbery charges from this year are pending.

The 17-year-old has convictions for simple assault, sexual assault, and unlawful taking of a vehicle, the prosecutor said. He was sentenced to 18 months of confinement two years ago for violating probation. He also faces trial later this month on charges of attempted burglary and criminal mischief.

The two others - a 15-year-old from Camden and a 16-year-old from Pennsauken who surrendered to the prosecutor's office yesterday morning - have no arrest records.

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