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14 Years Later, Trial Begins; Last of 3 Suspects in Stabbing Could Face Death Penalty

[FINAL Edition]

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It has been nearly 14 years since Barbara E. White was gagged, beaten and stabbed 82 times in her bathtub as her infant daughter toddled around her Fairfax County apartment.

Yesterday, the day White's daughter turned 15, the last suspect in White's killing went on trial at U.S. District Court in Alexandria. Thomas M. Hager could face the death penalty if convicted in the slaying of White, a 19-year-old single mother who fell in with a rough crowd in Southeast Washington but had been trying to get her life together.

In opening statements, prosecutors said her past caught up with her. They said White learned the location of a safe house where Hager -- a crack dealer later convicted of other murders -- was staying with his girlfriend, an old friend of White's. For that reason alone, prosecutors said, Hager and two other men tried to electrocute and drown White before stabbing her with her kitchen knives, returning to the kitchen for more knives when the blades broke or bent.

"That man, this man right here, Thomas Hager, the defendant, brutally, viciously murdered Barbara White in that bathroom," Assistant U.S. Attorney James L. Trump told jurors, his voice rising as he pointed at Hager, 34. "They stabbed her and stabbed her and stabbed her until she finally stopped struggling."

An attorney for Hager, John Kiyonaga, did not challenge the prosecution's evidence in his brief opening statement and appeared to be looking ahead to a possible death penalty phase if Hager is convicted. "Each one of you holds the life of a living, breathing man in your hands: Thomas Hager," Kiyonaga told the jury. He said the defense is "counting on" jurors to vote their conscience.

Family members of White's cried softly in the courtroom's third row as prosecutors flashed photographs of the red-haired teenager on the screen, including one of her lying dead, face down in the bathtub. White's daughter, Alexis, who was 13 months old at the time of her death, is a high school freshman and lives with White's sister. Alexis did not attend yesterday's court proceedings.

If the 14 male and two female jurors, including four alternates, convict Hager, the same jury will then consider whether he is eligible for the death penalty. If they determine that he is, they will decide on death or life in prison.

No jury at the Alexandria federal courthouse has voted for death, including in last year's death penalty trial of convicted Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist conspirator Zacarias Moussaoui.

Hager is charged with one count of murder while engaging in drug trafficking. Federal prosecutors became interested in the case after it was investigated for years by two Fairfax cold case homicide detectives, Robert Murphy and Steve Milefsky. Two other men, Lonnie T. Barnett Jr. and Arlington Johnson Jr., have pleaded guilty to similar federal charges in White's death and were sentenced to life in prison. They will testify against Hager, prosecutors said.