

A deadly punch, but is it murder?

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Alan Thompson left his job stocking shelves at a supermarket, looking to avenge a verbal slap hurled at his brother and one of his friends, prosecutors say.

Minutes later, in a Steak n Shake parking lot, he landed a single punch to the temple of Christopher Fannan. Thompson went calmly back to work, prosecutors say, as Fannan lay on the ground with a fatal brain injury.

It took all of 13 minutes

"He killed him," prosecutor Curt Allen told jurors during opening statements Tuesday in Thompson's trial. "And he didn't even know his name."

Allen painted Fannan, an 18-year-old senior at Sickles High, as a youth with a future "so bright." He was full of "hopes and dreams," Allen said, and was headed to the Army after graduation.

"All those hopes, all those dreams, all that promise was gone," Allen said.

The punch crushed a lifetime of expectations for Fannan's family. The parents of the man who threw it say they did not raise their son to wind up in prison.

"We had a vision for him," said Alan Thompson's mother, Ann Thompson. "He is not a thug, he is not a monster. . . . He's been portrayed as if he's someone in the streets who didn't have any upbringing."

Thompson, 23, faces charges of third-degree murder and manslaughter in the incident, which occurred May 19, 2002. If convicted he could spend up to 15 years in prison.

The sequence of events that ended with Fannan dead and Thompson behind bars started with the attempted break-in of a car parked at the home of Thompson's parents in Odessa.

Thompson's brother and a friend went looking for the perpetrators about 3:30 a.m. Fannan and a group of friends were hanging out at the nearby Citrus Park Steak n Shake when the two men drove up. Evan Brown, a friend of Fannan's, exchanged glances with the men and said, "What are you looking at?" or something similar.

The men drove away, only to return minutes later, this time with 6-foot-5, 200-pound Thompson in the back seat.

Thompson stepped out of the car, the prosecutor, said, and confronted the group.

"Who's running your mouth?" he asked the teenagers. "Scared to death," the prosecutor said, none of the boys responded.

The 5 foot 9, 150-pound Fannan was seated on the hood of a friend's car, eating sunflower seeds and saying nothing. Thompson walked up on Fannan's blind side. His fist slammed into Fannan's temple.

Fannan fell in a heap on the ground, unconscious and not breathing. He never woke up. Two weeks later, sheriff's deputies arrested Thompson.

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Thompson's lawyer, Brian Gonzalez, agreed that the case was full of "tragic circumstances." It was an "instantaneous and chaotic moment" with a "freakish" ending. He asked the jurors to focus on whether Thompson could have known that one punch could cause so much damage.

To convict Thompson, the jurors must find that Thompson knew, or should have known, that his actions would cause "great bodily harm."

Thompson could not have known, Gonzalez said. This was a "very, very unusual injury," he told the jurors.

Allen, the prosecutor, conceded that Thompson did not intend to kill Fannan. But Thompson knew the devastating effects of his punches, Allen said. He had thrown one before.

In 1998, Thompson punched a 19-year-old in the face, breaking the man's nose and chipping two of his teeth.

"He was aware of the damage he caused," Allen said.

Under cross-examination from the defense attorney, Dr. Sam Gulino of the Hillsborough County Medical Examiner's Office acknowledged Tuesday that Fannan's death was "a freak occurrence."

The fatal punch did not fracture Fannan's skull, he said, but produced a whiplash that tore a vessel at the base of his brain, causing bleeding and swelling. Contributing to the death: Fannan didn't see the punch coming and didn't have a chance to tense up his neck muscles.

The trial continues today and is expected to last the rest of the week.

Fannan's family declined to comment for this story. Ann Thompson, the defendant's mother, said she approached Fannan's mother at the courthouse and expressed her sorrow for what happened.

In an interview with the Times, Thompson's parents said they brought their son up strictly. When he lived at home, as he did until age 19, his curfew was 1 a.m. He volunteered at a church nursery for years.

When he started working at a McDonald's at 15, they said, he put aside money for his younger brother and sister. His father, Alan Thompson Sr., said he gave his children "everything you can possibly pour into them."

An ex-radio man with a booming voice, Thompson Sr. said he did mock interviews with his sons when they started football.

Alan Jr. showed great athletic promise, he said, and was going to Hillsborough Community College on a basketball scholarship. His parents say they had a bright future planned for him.

"That can still come to fruition," Alan Sr. said.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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