

## **Charges upped on stripper's story. Admission of killing-for-hire plot leads DA to ask for upgrade to first-degree murder against partner of slain Nesconset businessman**

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The friend and business partner of a Nesconset businessman killed last month will face first-degree murder charges with two others, according to online court records, after a Queens stripper also charged in the crime admitted being part of a murder-for-hire plot.

Ronald Thornton, 37, who had a new business venture with his partner and neighbor James DiMartino, is accused of planning an attack with three others that left DiMartino dead outside a Commack restaurant last month.

Thornton, along with Monique Randall, 19, her boyfriend, Donovan Raysor, 20, and an acquaintance from their Queens neighborhood, Darnell Festus, 23, were initially charged with second-degree murder in what police called a botched robbery.

But that story changed Tuesday when Randall, a stripper who knew Thornton as a customer in the club where she worked, said in court that she helped arrange DiMartino's killing at Thornton's request. She pleaded guilty in exchange for a sentence of 15 years to life, the minimum for second-degree murder.

Upgraded murder charges and additional felony conspiracy charges against Thornton, Raysor, and Festus were posted on a New York State court Web site this week.

Thornton, who has worked as a real estate broker, met the trio at Shady Al's Lounge on Jericho Turnpike, a few hundred yards from where DiMartino was shot once in the head Oct. 20, police say.

Raysor's attorney, Michael Brown of Central Islip, said Thornton visited the club and asked Randall to help him rob or kill DiMartino.

"Donovan was there, she turned to him and said 'This guy says you can get X amount of money if you do this,' and my guy said 'No way,'" Brown said. "Festus was there and he bit. He was very excited about doing it and he did it."

Brown said that surveillance videos would show Raysor was at a nearby motel at the time of the killing. "The only thing he's guilty of is knowing it may happen, which in New York State is not a crime."

Festus' attorney, Jason Bassett of Central Islip, said his client denies any involvement.

"I guess she first told a story about a robbery, then it's a murder-for-hire," Bassett said of Randall. "What's next? She seems to be finally giving a story the district attorney's office is happy with."

Festus, an aspiring rapper, was on parole after being released from an upstate prison in June following a felony weapon possession conviction.

Randall's attorney, Anthony La Pinta of Hauppauge, declined to comment.

Officials have said Thornton lured DiMartino, a married father of four, to the parking lot with a false promise of a business meeting.

Prosecutors have named Festus as the shooter. At her plea hearing, Randall said Thornton gave her a gun that she gave to Raysor and Festus. Thornton's attorney did not return calls Friday. Thornton, Festus and Raysor are to be arraigned next week. Randall is to be sentenced Jan. 29.