

Accused killer of Playboy model in Ardmore won't face death penalty at trial



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NORRISTOWN — The man accused of the strangulation murder of a model inside her Ardmore condo will not face the specter of death if he's convicted of the killing at his jury trial next year, according to prosecutors.

Montgomery County prosecutors revealed on Friday that they are not seeking the death penalty against Jonathan Wesley Harris in the event he's convicted of first-degree murder, which is an intentional killing, in connection with the alleged Aug. 22 strangulation death of Christina Rose Kraft, 36, inside her residence in the 100 block of Sibley Avenue in the Ardmore section of Lower Merion.

Under state law, first-degree murder is punishable by either life imprisonment or death by lethal injection.

With the death penalty off the table, Harris, 31, of Johnstown, Cambria County, faces life imprisonment if he's convicted of the first-degree murder charge.

Assistant District Attorney Brianna Ringwood said the decision was made after reviewing the facts of the case and the applicable law regarding the death penalty and after consulting with the victim's family.

“After reviewing all of those circumstances and in view of the totality of the circumstances, the decision was made not to seek the death penalty in this case,” Ringwood said.

Under state law, it's at a formal arraignment hearing that prosecutors must notify a judge about their intentions regarding the death penalty. Harris's formal arraignment hearing was on Friday.

In order to obtain a death penalty, prosecutors must show that aggravating factors – circumstances that make a killing more heinous – outweigh any mitigating factors – circumstances that favor a defendant. Specifically, prosecutors have 18 aggravating factors, under state law, which they can use to seek the death penalty.

During the arraignment hearing before Judge William R. Carpenter, Harris, wearing a red jailhouse jumpsuit, waived a formal reading of the specific charges lodged against him. Harris, who faces charges of first-, second- and third-degree murder, robbery, theft, receiving stolen property and possessing an instrument of crime in connection with Kraft's death, did not respond to a reporter's questions as he was escorted from the courtroom by sheriff's deputies.

A conviction of second-degree murder, a killing committed during the course of a felony such as robbery, carries a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment. Third-degree murder, a killing committed with malice, carries a possible maximum sentence of 20-to-40-years in prison.

Harris, who is represented by defense lawyers A. Charles Peruto Jr. and **Scott Sigman**, remains in the county jail without bail pending his trial.

Carpenter scheduled Harris's trial to begin on May 6, 2019.

The investigation began about 9 p.m. Aug. 22 when Kraft's boyfriend, who owned the condo at which Kraft resided, contacted Lower Merion police to report his concern that Kraft had not answered any of his calls or text messages. Kraft's boyfriend reported he was at her building but was unable to gain access because an interior security bolt was engaged, according to the criminal complaint.

When police forced their way inside the residence they discovered Kraft, a native of Margate, N.J., who previously modeled in photo shoots for Playboy, Vanity Fair, Victoria's Secret and Maxim, dead in her bed.

“In addition, the pillows, sheets and comforter surrounding her body, as well as areas of the bedroom carpet and walls were significantly bloodstained,” county Detective Gregory Henry and Lower Merion Detective Edward Sarama alleged in the arrest affidavit.

An autopsy determined Kraft died from ligature strangulation and she also suffered a fractured nose.

Detectives obtained surveillance video from the Sibley Avenue area and determined Kraft left the residence alone at 1:10 a.m. Aug. 22 and was observed at 3:05 a.m. in a first-floor lobby returning with a male, who entered the elevator with her, according to the criminal complaint.

Detectives alleged the apartment's security system indicated a person exited from the back door of the residence onto a terrace around 5:19 a.m.

"During this time a violent struggle occurred in the apartment where Ms. Kraft was beaten, her nose was broken and she was strangled to death," District Attorney Kevin R. Steele previously alleged, referring to the two-hour period of time.

Video surveillance showed a person walking beneath Kraft's condo terrace at 5:25 a.m. and later walking along Sibley Avenue to Church Street and later on Montgomery and City avenues, according to court papers.

The investigation determined a white Banana Republic shirt and Kraft's cellphone, a designer handbag and Kraft's house keys were missing from the apartment. Township police eventually located the shirt, "which appeared to contain dried blood," between shrubbery near Church Road and Sibley Avenue and Kraft's phone in the area of Montgomery and Bryn Mawr avenues during searches of the area on Aug. 25 and Aug. 27.

Detectives also obtained information that Kraft used a Lyft car service at 1:11 a.m. Aug. 22 for a ride from her residence to the 1400 block of Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. The Lyft driver subsequently told detectives Kraft requested to make a stop in the Manayunk section of Philadelphia prior to being dropped off at the Chestnut Street location.

Video surveillance from Chestnut Street revealed that at 2 a.m. Kraft walked to the area of South Broad and Locust streets and encountered a male, identified as Harris, and the pair continued to walk the streets surrounding South Broad and 13th streets, according to the criminal complaint. The pair was seen in the 1300 block of Locust Street when they appeared to enter a vehicle, according to court documents.

Comparing the various video surveillance footage detectives alleged the person seen with Kraft in Philadelphia is the same person observed entering Kraft's apartment with her after 3 a.m., according to the arrest affidavit.

Authorities released the photographs and video surveillance footage of the "person of interest" to the news media on Aug. 27 and a day later a "concerned citizen" contacted detectives and identified Harris as the person depicted in the surveillance footage, court papers indicate. The witness, detectives alleged, received text messages from Harris

around 2:40 a.m. Aug. 22 during which Harris wrote he was at a woman's "crib in ardmore."

Harris was apprehended several days later in Pittsburgh after he allegedly fled from the Philadelphia area after the murder.

