

## Ronald Battle



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James Johns, owner of Gold and Diamond Connection, a jewelry store in Calumet City, Illinois, was robbed and murdered on the store's premises on May 29, 2003. Johns received a phone call at 9:06 AM just after opening the store that day. The caller, a man named Bruce Arens, spoke with Johns for five minutes before hearing a buzzer sound. Johns told Arens he had a customer at the door and ended the phone call at 9:11 AM.

A little later, Irene Sanchez arrived at Johns' store to pick up a piece of jewelry she had on lay-a-way. Sanchez reported that she could see a young black man behind the counter as she approached the entrance to the store. The man walked out of the store, carrying an overstuffed white garbage bag. He walked past Sanchez in the direction of the beauty shop next door and then began running. Sanchez described the man she saw to police as 5'11", 180 pounds, with short black hair, and no facial hair. The man lost his grip on the bag and it landed on the ground; some jewelry fell out, and he scrambled to pick up it up.

He got into an older model black four-door car and drove off. Sanchez approached the door of Johns' store but could not gain access; she tried the doorbell and knocking, but there was no answer. She went around to the side of the building and noticed Johns' car parked outside. Then she headed for the hair salon next door. She saw that there was still some jewelry on the ground. She picked it up and then asked an employee in the hair salon to call the police. The police arrived soon after. They later testified that they found Johns' body at 9:34 AM in the store.

Sanchez became so upset after realizing what had happened that she was taken by paramedics to St. Margaret Hospital in Hammond, Indiana and given a Xanax to calm her down, because she had not taken her blood pressure medication that day. In the emergency room she gave police a description of the man with the white garbage bag and the car that he drove away from the crime scene.

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, five days after the crime, Ronald Battle was arrested and charged with the murder. He was 21 years old, lived in Calumet City in his mother's home along with his brother Brandon Rogers, age 15 and sister Tamika Rogers age 12.

On the morning of the robbery/murder, May 29, 2003, he took his siblings to school; Tamika was dropped off at approximately 8:15 that morning and Brandon at 8:30. Then Battle returned home and was alone. His mother, Yvonne Key, had gone to work at her job earlier that morning.

Around 9:00 AM Battle received two phone calls from a woman named Amelia Jones. While Battle was on the phone the first time with Amelia Jones, his cousin, Donnell Coleman, came by and asked to borrow Battle’s car. Battle gave Coleman the keys and returned to finish his phone call with Jones. After speaking with Jones, Battle stayed home, watching television. A little while later, around 9:30 he received a phone call from his mother, Yvonne Key. The call lasted a few minutes. Shortly after the call ended Coleman returned to Battle’s home.

Coleman was holding a white garbage bag filled with jewelry and appeared nervous. He placed the white bag on Battle’s living room floor and removed jewelry trays inside which were holding rings. Then he placed the jewelry in a separate bag and put the trays back in the white garbage bag. Battle was now concerned that Coleman had used the car for a robbery. At the time Battle was on parole.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS AROUND 9 AM ON MAY 29, 2003

BATTLE’S ACCOUNT	WITNESSES’ ACCOUNT	STATE’S ACCOUNT
Around 9:00 Amelia Jones calls Battle on Key home landline	9:06-9:11 Arens calls Johns	8:49-8:53 Call made to Key landline from (708) 439-0381 Caller unidentified
Around 9:00 Amelia Jones calls Battle again on Key home landline	9:12-9:30 Sanchez arrives at jewelry store (exact time not specified)	9:01-9:09 Call made to Key landline from (708) 439-0381 Caller unidentified
Around 9:30 Yvonne Key calls Battle on home landline	9:34 Police arrive at crime scene (Victim found 9:34)	9:31-9:31 (0 seconds) Call made to Key landline From (708) 997-1057 Caller unidentified

		<p>9:32-9:32 (0 seconds)  Call made to Key landline  From (708) 997-1057  Caller unidentified</p> <p>9:35-9:37  Call made to Key landline  From (708) 997-1057  Caller unidentified</p>
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Battle and Coleman got in Battle’s car and drove to the house of Battle’s girlfriend, Catrina Hines at 76<sup>th</sup> & Jeffrey, on Chicago’s south side. They parked the car in the parking area behind the home of a neighbor. As Battle went inside to talk to Hines, Coleman walked down a few houses and put the bag holding the jewelry trays in a garbage can.

After abandoning the car Battle and Coleman took a bus to 52nd and Wood. When they got off the bus they went to the home of a friend of Coleman’s, where Coleman gave Battle some rings to sell from the bag he had been carrying. Battle then brought the rings to a man named Tommy Johnson to fence them.

Later on the day of May 29th Catrina Hines’ neighbor, Constance Daniel, discovered the car on her property and asked to have it towed. That night, after hearing a description of a similar car on the news, she called the police to inform them about the car which had been towed from her property. The car was registered to Yvonne Key, Battle’s mother.

**THE ARREST**

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, the Calumet City police went to Battle’s home and questioned Yvonne Key. She had just returned from work and was in her bedroom on the phone. Battle was not there. Brandon and Tamika, her other children, were in another room. The police repeatedly asked her if she knew someone named Hector; she said that she

did not. They then asked her if she would go to the police station with them to look at photos. They did not allow her to keep her door closed while she got dressed.

After she arrived at the station she sat alone in a room for an hour and a half. Then a male and female officer came into the room where she said they “pushed me up against the wall and told me to spread them. I felt humiliated and embarrassed.” After repeated questioning about Hector, the police turned their attention to the jewelry store robbery and murder.

They asked Yvonne Key if Ronald Battle was her son and whether she owned a 1975 black Ford LTD. She answered “yes” to both questions. Finally, after eight hours at the station they told her she was not under arrest but that she had to sign a paper. They allowed her to return home to her other children. When she arrived, her children told her that an aunt had called saying that Ronald had been arrested.

Yvonne Key did not know where he was and had not heard from him in a few days. She got on the phone calling police stations in Chicago to try to find out where he was and what the amount of the bond would be. But she was unable to locate him. The next day the Calumet City police called her home while she was at work and told her children that they wanted her to come back to the station after she got home. When she arrived the police told her that her son Ronald was in custody there and that he had made a videotaped confession.

His girlfriend Catrina had also been in custody and was later released after making a statement. The police would not allow Key to see her son unless she made a statement. “I remember somebody start talking first and everything she was saying sounded like gibberish. She began talking and writing. Once she was done she told me to initial here and there, so I did.”

Battle had been staying at Tommy Johnson’s home until June 4, 2003, when he was arrested there. At the Calumet City Police station he was interrogated by detectives Kevin Rapacz and Donald Joswiak. The police intermittently interrogated Battle at the station for three days. Battle later testified that the detectives started out treating him well, but then they threatened to charge Battle’s mother as an accessory to the murder of James Johns. They showed Battle a fingerprint card and a photo of his mother signing something, which he assumed was an arrest report. Battle also testified that the police threatened Catrina Hines, his girlfriend, and his

younger brother, Brandon. Battle believed that he had no choice but to submit a false confession in order to protect his family.

According to Key's account, when Battle was finally allowed to see her on June 5th, she "grabbed him and hugged him tight as I could and we was crying something awful. I said, Baby, why would you tell these people that you killed somebody? He said, 'I had to say it, Mama'. I said, what do you mean you had to?', and at that moment the officer comes up and took me out of the room."

## **THE QUESTIONS**

The events and circumstances surrounding Battle's ultimate conviction raise many questions. First, the discrepancy in identifying the suspect. Sanchez described the man she saw to police as 5'11", 180 pounds, with short black hair, and no facial hair. At the time of his arrest, Ronald Battle 5'10", weighed 250 pounds, and sported a mustache and goatee.

The police improperly influenced witnesses to implicate Battle. At the Calumet City Police Station Irene Sanchez was shown video footage of Battle taken at an earlier time which showed Battle standing next to his car. Sanchez identified the car as being the one in which she saw the perpetrator of the Johns murder drive. At a pretrial hearing the State's Attorney admitted they had done this. She was primed to associate Battle with the getaway car. On June 5th, the day after Battle's arrest, Sanchez viewed a lineup to identify the perpetrator. Battle was by far the largest person in the line-up. He was placed in the center and was the only person holding his number with two hands, which he had been instructed to do by the police.

Similar tactics have been used by police to spotlight a suspect and guide the witness to identify him. When Beverly Schmidt, the woman in the hair salon next door, viewed the lineup, she was not able to identify anyone as the perpetrator. An investigator for the Cook County Public Defender, Everett Scott, later submitted an affidavit confirming a conversation with Beverly Schmidt about the lineup. Schmidt stated that she could not identify the perpetrator and that the police then asked her: "If you had to pick a guy from the lineup, could it be Ronald Battle?"

Another investigator with the Office of the Cook County Public Defender, Debra Hanson, drove from Johns' jewelry store to Battle's home three times. Each time it took her a little over seven minutes to get there. Battle had finished his phone

conversation with Amelia Jones around 9:10 that morning, just as James Johns ended his phone conversation with Bruce Arens, sighting a customer at the door. There is no way for Battle to have driven to the store in that time period to commit the crime.

At the trial the State alleged that Battle stopped on his way home after the murder to burn the clothes he was wearing in a vacant lot and to sell the gun to a passerby, which would have lengthened the seven minutes it normally took to drive that distance. Neither the burned clothes nor the gun were found by police.

In Battle's "confession" he stated that he went to the jewelry store to rob it, because he owed \$10,000 to a drug dealer. However, there was no corroborating evidence regarding this alleged debt. He said he faced Johns to kill him, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger, but the testimony from the medical examiner revealed that Johns was shot in the back of the head at close range. The medical examiner's testimony also stated that Johns was struck three times before he was shot. Battle did not say anything about striking Johns in his "confession", which was made before the ME's report. Further, the Calumet City police testified at the trial they made a recording of Battle's confessional statement but did not record other parts of the interrogation in which Battle allegedly made other inculpatory statements to which they testified at the trial.

### **ATTEMPTS AT PROOF**

The relationship between Battle, Jones, and his Caroline Hines, Battle's girlfriend, is complicated. Battle says that Jones and Hines are rivals. Battle testified at his trial that Jones called him twice, before and after 9:00 AM, on the morning of the crime, asking him to drive her to South Suburban College. He declined to do that. She ended the call and took a PACE bus there.

The State maintained that the identity of Jones as the caller could not be verified because the cell phone was activated by a prepaid cell phone card with no subscriber information as to the identity of the owner. Jones refused to come forward as a defense witness to testify that she was on the phone with Battle at the time of the murder. Efforts to bring her in to testify were unsuccessful.

In a Facebook encounter with Battle's sister years later, Jones said that she would not help Battle because he had cheated on her. She then took down her Facebook page.

Yvonne Key has made two affidavits in the case. Both concerned conversations she had with Donnell Coleman, her nephew. A year after Battle's arrest, she and Ronald's girl-friend, Catrina Hines, drove to Key's sister's house. While they were there they had a conversation with Coleman, in which he stated that he could not believe they were charging Ronald with the murder, and that he knew Ronald did not do it. "I asked Donnell how he knew Ronald did not do it. Donnell said that he was sorry. I asked Donnell, 'Sorry about what?' Donnell responded the he could not say, but that he was so sorry."

In a second affidavit Yvonne Key stated: "I was at my nephew's house [Donnell Coleman] for his birthday. We were drinking and he started crying, telling me it was his fault that Ronald was locked up. The next day I asked the public defender if I could take a tape recorder over there with me and record everything that was said. He told me that I couldn't do that because it would violate my nephew's rights." The court disregarded this evidence, because it noted that the issue of the phone call had been addressed and excluded in pre-trial motions and did not constitute new evidence.

Battle was found guilty in a jury trial of first degree murder and armed robbery on April 4, 2006, about three years after the crime. He was sentenced to 95 years—50 years for murder, 25 years for using a firearm to commit the murder, and 20 years for armed robbery. In 2009 the appellate court reduced the sentence to 75 years, due to a judicial error. The armed robbery sentence was changed to concurrent, rather than consecutive. Battle has filed three post-conviction petitions on his own behalf; other motions were filed by attorneys. A petition to the Appellate Court filed by one of Battle's attorneys in 2016 included a photo of Coleman, which resembled the initial police sketch made after interviewing Irene Sanchez. This photo was not submitted by Battle's first attorney in his original defense. Battle also tried to provide the Conviction Integrity Unit in the Cook County State's Attorney office with information that he believes could prove his innocence but was unsuccessful. The disputed evidence of this case remains unresolved.