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Local coach tells his side of story  
Murder plot suspect rebuts accusations

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Publication Date : September 20, 2000

Before he was charged with conspiring to murder a state district judge, Carroll Graham Parker Jr. was known on and off athletic fields as "coach."

It was an endearing term for a burly high school football and soccer coach who appeared to have it all: a satisfying career, a close family, a gorgeous girlfriend and a supportive network of sports-crazed buddies from high school and college.

Today, authorities have other words to describe Carroll Parker, and none is flattering.

They accuse Parker of being the middleman in a scheme to kill District Judge Mark Luitjen. Authorities say the coach with the flat-top haircut was recruited for the job by a childhood friend, now in prison, named Robert E. Lee.

Authorities say the motive was simple: Lee apparently wanted the judge dead before he could issue a recommendation on his criminal appeal.

Parker's descent from popular coach and social studies teacher to suspect in a murder plot seems inconceivable to those who know him. For more than a month, they have grappled with publicly aired allegations that the sandy-haired son of an Army major, a sports star voted Most Valuable Player in high school and All America in college had joined ranks with criminals.

"I would believe this about myself before I'd believe it about Carroll," said Ronnie Slack, a high school government teacher who worked with Parker at San Antonio's McCollum High and now shares a house with him. "There are no doubters on our campus. None. The kids are constantly saying 'Not Coach Parker.'"

Going public with his story for the first time, Parker says he would have been neither stupid enough nor evil enough to help murder anyone.

In the seven weeks since he was charged with the crime and released on bond, Parker, 38, a divorced father of two and 13-year coaching veteran, says his universe has become a virtual prison.

"It's like the 4-foot fence becomes a 12-foot fence," he said, peering out the living room window of his China Grove home. "You can hardly go out anymore. You're always wondering what people will think of you. (It requires) terrible strength to get out of the house."

Against the advice of one of his two attorneys, Parker decided to tell his story in the hope it will raise questions about the way the case has been handled.

If there indeed was a conspiracy, why has only one person been charged?

Could a murder plot have existed if, as authorities allege, no money changed hands and no weapon was

produced?

Why, if he was a danger to society, has he been free to walk the streets?

During a three-hour interview in the presence of his attorneys, Parker spoke earnestly about his life and his ordeal and the odds he faces.

The case against him

Authorities with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Internal Affairs Division, who refused to discuss the case, allege the plot against Luitjen was concocted by Lee earlier this year inside the Beeville prison.

Lee, who is serving two, 25-year prison terms for conspiring to murder his ex-wife in 1997, apparently was angry over an unfavorable recommendation Luitjen issued last summer on his first appeal. Authorities say he wanted the judge dead before he could issue a recommendation on a second appeal.

Parker, they say, agreed to collect the money that would be used to pay hit men.

In mid-June, the San Antonio Express-News became a reluctant participant in the story when a reporter received a letter from a prison inmate detailing allegations of a plot against Luitjen. The newspaper notified the Bexar County district attorney's office.

Three weeks later, on the evening of July 5, Parker said undercover investigators made contact with him by phone. Referring to Lee, they said they were "doing a job for Bobby" and demanded money.

An account provided by investigators on the day Parker was arrested is consistent with Parker's story.

Parker's arrest warrant makes no mention of him discussing murder. It says prison letters Lee apparently sent to a fellow inmate - who contacted authorities - implicated Parker.

The warrant eludes to a code word that authorities say meant murder. Sources close to the case, who spoke on condition of anonymity, say the code word meant something different to Parker: It referred to a plot of a different sort - one that did not involve murder.

So far, investigators have not yet handed their evidence to a prosecuting agency. A decision to prosecute will likely be left to the office of the Bexar or Bee County district attorney.

Parker's attorneys clearly are perturbed by the pace of the investigation.

"If they've got a case against him, take it to a law enforcement agency," said Parker's lawyer, Pat Hancock. "This man can't afford to put his life on hold. Put the facts in a report and give it to a prosecuting agency. They can reject it or they can take it to a grand jury."

Parker's account

Referring to contacts with Lee and later with undercover investigators, Parker said he never agreed to help kill anyone.

"No one, neither the judge nor anyone else, was ever mentioned. I never heard the judge's name until the

day I was arrested."

While his attorney would not permit Parker to reveal what he told investigators after his arrest, Parker acknowledged that Lee sought his help in destroying evidence linking him to an attack against his ex-wife.

Parker said that earlier this year, during one of his monthly visits to Lee, his friend asked him to collect \$1,300, a sum that would be paid to an employee who worked in the evidence room of the San Antonio Police Department. Parker said Lee believed the employee would destroy a hunting knife that had been used to convict Lee at his 1998 trial.

Lee, who has not yet been charged in connection with a plot against the judge, apparently knew of the employee through contacts in prison.

Parker said he declined his friend's request, saying: "That's crazy, nobody is going to risk their career for \$1,300."

Parker said he never gave the matter much thought.

In April, Lee was transferred to a prison in Abilene. Parker continued to visit him each month, journeying five hours each way for a two-hour prison visit.

Phone calls

On the evening of July 5, as he was settling in to watch "Survivor," Parker's phone rang.

On the other end was a woman, a mutual friend of Parker and Lee's. She was sobbing.

According to Parker, the woman told him there were two men in her art gallery, asking a lot of questions. And demanding money.

Parker said one of the men took the phone. He said "they were there to do a job for Bobby."

There was talk of money but Parker said he never promised to turn anything over. He says the subject of murder was never raised.

The conversation lasted about a minute and a half, he said.

Questioned about why he didn't call police, Parker said: "Because I had no fear for my personal safety."

Three days later, on July 8, Parker left with a friend for a previously scheduled, one-week cruise to Mexico.

Four days after he returned, on the afternoon of July 19, Parker said the man from the art gallery called him at home.

Parker said the man told him he wanted to resume their discussion.

"I responded I didn't want to have anything to do with him and not to call me back again," he said.

About 7 p.m. the following Wednesday, July 26, Parker said he was putting on his shoes when he heard a knock on his door. When Parker opened it, he stood face to face with several undercover officers who had their badges displayed.

Parker was arrested for solicitation to commit capital murder.

#### Friendship with Bobby Lee

While denying involvement in a murder plot, Parker reluctantly acknowledges his close friendship with Lee.

The two met in sixth grade at Fort Sam Houston Elementary. They were sons of military men, accustomed to the itinerant nature of Army life.

They rode the school bus together and they loved sports.

Parker's mother, Betty, a retired San Antonio schoolteacher, remembered them as being inseparable.

"Military kids come and go. Carroll had a million friends, but Bobby stayed. They formed a very strong bond."

Parker and Lee attended Cole High School at Fort Sam Houston, where friends and family described them as mediocre students who excelled in athletics. They both played varsity football.

Though they saw less of each other after high school, their friendship continued.

In 1981, Parker left for Texas Lutheran College, where he majored in physical education and minored in history.

A walk-on, he won a football scholarship as a sophomore and went on to win All-America honors.

Lee attended school in Waco, but dropped out before he earned a degree.

He returned to San Antonio, began working for a landscaping firm, and eventually took over his family's laundry business.

In 1988, he married his high school sweetheart, Kimberly. Parker was best man at his wedding.

The couple had two children.

Parker graduated from college in spring 1985 and began coaching. He landed his first job at McCollum, on the city's South Side, where he stayed a year.

Over the next few years, Parker held coaching positions at districts in the Rio Grande Valley and in Central and East Texas. He married in 1988 and had two children before divorcing in the early 1990s.

Around that time, Parker returned to San Antonio's McCollum High.

From then until Lee's arrest in 1997, Parker said he saw Lee sporadically.

"I saw Bobby four to six times a year. We'd call up to go to a movie or go down to the coast. He was real busy with his laundry business and when you teach and coach you are real busy yourself."

Parker said he was not aware of his friend's marital troubles and said he was shocked by the murder conspiracy charges that were levied against Lee in 1997.

Because he was working, Parker said he wasn't able to attend Lee's trial. But he insists that his friend's case was "flawed."

"(The conviction) surprised me as much as anybody else who heard about it. I was disappointed."

When pressed, Parker said he had some "questions" about Lee's role in Kimberly's assault, but said he kept them to himself and was steadfast in his loyalty.

He saw Lee more after his imprisonment than before, visiting him regularly, first when he was at Bexar County Jail, and later when he was assigned to Beeville and then Abilene.

"My purpose was to visit him and do the best I could to keep him out of trouble," Parker said.

Parker said the two spent time discussing Lee's post-conviction appeals, but Lee never turned to him for help.

And Lee never seemed unduly angry about Luitjen's recommendation that a higher court not consider his first appeal, Parker said.

Mostly, Parker said he and Lee would use the monthly visits to catch up. "I would talk about my kids, my life as a coach, my girlfriend, vacation, television," Parker said. "He would talk about gangs, his legal writ, bad food and hoe duty. He was a cook (in prison), he talked about the kitchen."

#### Parker's arrest

The night he was taken into custody, Parker said he spoke with investigators for more than an hour at a DPS office in San Antonio. He waived his right to an attorney and gave permission for the interview to be videotaped.

At the time, investigators acknowledged they had asked Parker to help them build a case against Lee. Parker corroborated this.

He said that the night of his arrest, when he was taken to a jail in Beeville for arraignment, investigators pulled out an arrest warrant, which was blank.

He said investigators told them it would remain blank as long as he cooperated.

"They said the charge would never show up on my record," he said.

Both sides offered a similar account of what transpired over the next few days.

Investigators wanted Parker to visit Lee in Abilene. They wanted him to secretly record Lee discussing plans for the judge.

Parker agreed to go. A trip was scheduled for that Saturday.

"When you're surrounded by police officers, you agree to anything to get out of your situation," he said.

Sometime after midnight, Parker was released from the Beeville jail on a \$2,000 personal recognizance bond, an unusually small sum for a man facing a capital felony.

Investigators acknowledged they wanted to make Parker's life as hassle-free as possible.

By Friday night, Parker said he had serious misgivings about the agreement.

At 8:30 the next morning, Parker arrived at Stinson Airport to meet a chartered plane. Before boarding, he pulled investigators aside and told them he was having doubts.

Parker said he wanted assurances that they would drop the case if Lee failed to mention a murder plot.

He said they told him they would coach him until he did.

Parker said he would go along with the plan if they could show him evidence of Lee's involvement in a murder plot. He said they told him "it doesn't work that way."

Frustrated, Parker told them he wanted no part in their plan. He returned home. The chartered plane never left the runway.

Over the weekend, Parker said he tried to phone authorities to see if they would be coming for him.

Two days later, on Monday, July 31 at 11:30 a.m., Parker was rearrested as he, his children and several fellow coaches entered the Pan American restaurant near McCollum High for lunch.

This time, a surety bond was set at \$40,000. When his mother secured that amount the next day, Parker returned home to a contingent of reporters.

His life today

Six weeks after his arrest, Parker says he has no regrets about his decision not to cooperate with authorities.

"I always believed you should help the police and volunteer your time, but I didn't think this was right," he said.

"I just wanted a little confirmation about what I was going to do, but they wouldn't give it to me. ... The way I was brought up, you've got to stand up for your rights."

Three days after his arrest, the Harlandale School District placed Parker on administrative leave with pay. Today, Parker is lucky if he can fill his day.

He receives nightly progress reports on his former students from Slack, 58, his roommate and McCollum colleague.

He is helping a friend remodel a house.

He meets regularly with his attorneys.

And he waits.

For word of an indictment. Or news that he's been cleared.

"He's stressed, edgy, he breaks down," his girlfriend, Heather Reynolds, 25, a college student, said recently.

Parker hasn't seen or heard from Lee since his arrest in July, but he continues living with Slack in a two-bedroom manufactured home owned by Lee's parents.

The Lees live next door.

Acknowledging an awkward arrangement, Parker says he has not spoken to them much since their son's name has become linked with his in a murder conspiracy.

Parker said he believes his friendship with Bobby Lee will survive, even as he acknowledges in an unsteady voice his own uncertain future.

"If they lose, they will go on to the next case. Even if I win, I will never ever be Coach Parker again.

"I will always be 'Isn't that the guy?'

"I will never ever recover 100 percent from this."

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