

## GREATER NEW YORK

# Trial to Start in Queens Jogger's Slaying

By ZOLAN KANHO-YOUNG

When a jogger was strangled in a Queens park in August 2016, the heat was on for the New York Police Department to find her killer.

The brutal slaying of 30-year-old Karina Vetrano captivated the public and sent a chill through the city. The victim's parents, friends and neighbors in the tight-knit Howard Beach community demanded the police do all they could to bring her killer swiftly to justice.

NYPD detectives chased down hundreds of leads over the course of months but had little success, even when the NYFD, the mayor's office and the Vetrano family offered a combined \$285,000 of reward money for tips leading to an arrest. Then, a half a year after the killing, as the NYPD faced mounting questions on whether the case had gone cold, officials announced they had caught a suspect, then-20-year-old Chanel Lewis of the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn.

When Mr. Lewis's criminal trial begins Monday in a court in Queens, his attorneys plan to seize on the pressure the NYFD was under to make an arrest and to argue that the department rushed through its investigation to please the public.

"It was going nowhere. They were starting to get, I don't want to use the word desperate, but they needed to prove this," said Mr. Lewis's attorney, Robert Moeller. "They wanted to solve this case. So along comes somebody and, oh, the profile fits."

Mr. Lewis, who attended a school that caters to students with behavioral concerns and lived at home with his parents at the time of his arrest, is charged with first-degree murder and sexual abuse for the killing of Ms. Vetrano on Aug. 2, 2016.

Ms. Vetrano regularly jogged with her father, Phil Vetrano, in Spring Creek Park

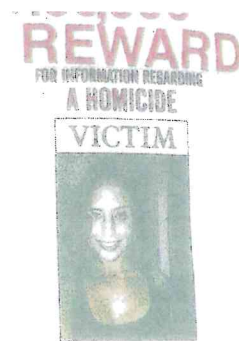


Chanel Lewis was arrested six months after Karina Vetrano's slaying. His lawyer says public pressure led to a flawed investigation.

but ran the path alone on the evening she was killed. After she didn't return her father's phone calls, he searched for her with the police. Mr. Vetrano later found her body with some of her clothing pulled off, police have said.

NYPD officials have highlighted their investigation as an example of diligent detective work. The break in the case came in January 2017 when police Lt. John Russo asked detectives to follow up on a man he had police officers stop in Howard Beach three months before Ms. Vetrano was killed.

Police officers followed up with the man and Mr. Lewis voluntarily gave a sample of his DNA, according to court



filings. Authorities say that DNA matched evidence found on Ms. Vetrano's cellphone, neck and under her fingernails. Lt. Russo, who was is-

sued several awards for his work in the case, previously told The Wall Street Journal it was like "hitting the lottery."

"There is a strong case against Mr. Lewis," NYPD spokesman Patrick Conry said on Friday. "The outcome will be decided in a court of law."

Mr. Moeller and his legal team hope to cast doubt on the reliability of that DNA evidence as well as a videotaped confession that his legal team describes as forced.

When Mr. Lewis was arrested, detectives didn't take him to the precinct station house near his home or the precinct station house where the crime occurred but rather one more than 8 miles away. Mr. Moeller said this was in an

effort to keep Mr. Lewis away from his family and hold him overnight in police custody, where he eventually confessed.

"They didn't want anyone to know where he was," Mr. Moeller said. "If your child was arrested near your house, what precinct would you go to?"

In court documents, prosecutors from the Queens District Attorney's Office say Mr. Lewis asked to speak to police about the killing after initially not answering any of their questions.

"And, because the defendant had access to food, water and a bathroom, spent the night watching cartoons, and was not handcuffed, his confession to the police after he spent 12 hours in custody was

voluntary," Queens District Attorney Richard Brown said in a court document.

Prosecutors will also likely point to notes from emergency calls police uncovered when Mr. Lewis, as a distressed teenager, told responders he wanted to hurt girls.

Mr. Lewis's lawyers will argue that the crime scene in Spring Creek Park was contaminated with various DNA.

They plan to show video footage showing other people using the park for recreation at the time of Ms. Vetrano's slaying. DNA testing in criminal investigations doesn't return a match but rather shows whether two DNA samples have a high probability of being the same.

Creating doubt among the jurors will be a challenge, according to Mark Zauderer, the former chair of New York's commission on the jury, a panel that examined the jury system.

"DNA like other advances in science has come to be generally accepted in the public as basically reliable," Mr. Zauderer said. "Defense lawyers will typically try to attack not the science of DNA but the way in which the DNA evidence in the particular case was handled."

Lt. Russo is expected testify later in the week. The detective who secured Mr. Lewis's confession is also expected to testify. Mr. Moeller said it is possible Mr. Lewis could testify.

Mr. Moeller will be focused on keeping jurors concentrated on the evidence of the case and not on emotional aspects. Ms. Vetrano's parents, who were outspoken throughout the investigation, are expected to attend court each day of the trial. The Vetranos and the Queens District Attorney's office didn't return requests for comment.

"What happened to Karina Vetrano was horrible," Mr. Moeller said. "The question is did they get the right guy who did it?"

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