

The Miami Herald

Tuesday, August 8, 2006

Youngest Victim Testifies

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MIAMI—She used the words of a child, clearly embarrassed to be describing the details of an adult evil inflicted upon her.

She told the Miami-Dade Circuit jury about “his thing” and her “front private parts,” and admitted she didn’t even know the clinical terms for those body parts when she was raped and sodomized three years ago, at the age of 11.

But she was positive that Reynaldo Rapalo was the man who did it.

“I will always remember his face,” she said, after pointing to Rapalo in the courtroom Monday.

“He will always be in my mind.”

Rapalo is on trial, charged with raping the child, now 14, back in 2003. He is accused of raping six other women and girls during a yearlong spree that left southern Miami neighborhoods terrified.

Residents called the attacker the Shenandoah Rapist. While police frantically scoured the Shenandoah, Silver Bluff and Little Havana neighborhoods, parents locked their daughters away. Grown women feared answering a doorbell.

During opening arguments, Assistant State Attorney Laura Adams used terms of adult outrage to describe the crimes against the 11-year-old.

“The things that he did to her that afternoon are the exact reason that every parent tells their child not to open the door to strangers,” she said.

Rapalo’s attorney, Khurram Wahid, argued the case was one of “mistaken identity.” But he must overcome a

mountain of evidence.

Not only was the victim confident that Rapalo was her attacker, but police found his DNA and fingerprints at the scene, according to court records.

In addition, Rapalo confessed to all of the rapes, and even drove around with detectives pointing out his victims’ homes. Rapalo faces a separate trial for each victim and could receive a life sentence in each case.

In his opening argument, Wahid told the jury that the DNA test was rushed and that the crime scene wasn’t processed properly because police, desperate to catch a suspect, wanted Rapalo to be him.

He did not address Rapalo’s confessions, which were taped by detectives.

The victim in Monday’s trial was not the first one assaulted, but she was the youngest and the first child the Shenandoah Rapist attacked, police say.

Sitting on the witness stand, she quietly told the jury how she opened the door because she thought the man standing there was her cousin. When he turned to face her, she realized she was wrong, but it was too late.

He grabbed her neck and forced her back into the house, closing the door behind him, she said.

Then he wrapped his arm around her in a choke-hold and dragged her around the house while he checked to make sure she was home alone.

He pulled her into her mother’s bedroom and raped her, then dragged her to the bathroom and into another bedroom where he pinned her down and raped her again and sodomized her.

“It hurt a lot,” she told the jury.

At one point her mother called and

she told her attacker that if she didn’t answer, her mother would worry. He held her tight and told her not to say anything that would arouse suspicion. He listened to the phone call, hearing her mother say she would be home at 5:30 p.m.

“He said he had more time to play with me,” she said.

Wahid questioned her about whether she was scared, or crying. Yes, she was scared, she said; no, she didn’t cry. He asked her how often she had her face turned away from her attacker and whether she was nervous.

But Assistant State Attorney Josh Weintraub came back with more questions.

“Did you have a problem seeing his face?” he asked

“No.”

“Is there any doubt as you sit in this courtroom today that the man who raped you is sitting right there?” he continued.

“No doubt at all,” she said.

As the rape continued, the little girl tried to get her attacker to stop. She told the jury how she looked through the bedroom door to the kitchen clock and saw that it was only 4:30.

“I told him it was 4:50 and my mother would be home soon,” she said.

“He said he would do the same to her,” she said.

She tried telling him that her uncle would come home, too, but he didn’t seem to care.

Finally, he left.

When she heard him close the door behind him, she said she rushed to the front of the house and locked the door before calling her mother.

Her mother also testified Monday,

weeping as she recalled that awful call and how she kept her daughter on the phone as she raced home.

“She was in her bathrobe,” the woman said, choking back tears. “I hugged her and called 911.”

The girl was strangled so forcefully that blood vessels in her eyes burst, according to photos shown to the jury. She also had bruises on her neck.

Adams said that when Rapalo was arrested, he consented to a DNA test. He boldly told detectives it would come back negative and that he wanted a letter of apology. A few hours later, the test came back positive.

While they waited for the test’s results, Rapalo tried to crawl out of the police station through a ceiling tile, Adams said.

Rapalo was charged with escape earlier this year after authorities say he tied 54 bedsheets together and climbed out of the Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Center. He was recaptured after six days on the run.

Testimony in the rape trial is scheduled to continue today.