

September 6, 2011

Family of Black Man Sues Whites in Killing

By KIM SEVERSON

ATLANTA — The family of a black man run down and killed in a motel parking lot in Jackson, Miss., filed a wrongful-death lawsuit on Tuesday against the group of white teenagers they say is responsible.

The lawsuit, filed in Hinds County Circuit Court in Jackson, depicts the death of James C. Anderson as a racially motivated attack and outlines an evening of drinking that culminated with a caravan of teenagers from a largely white suburban county driving 16 miles to Jackson intent on harassing African-Americans.

“We want to send a message to people who want to use race as a reason to target someone,” said Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center, who joined Winston Thompson III, the family’s lawyer, in filing the suit.

“It appears this group went out to target a black person,” Mr. Dees said.

The suit did not specify an amount for damages, but it included accusations of negligence as a way to tap into the homeowner’s insurance policies of some of the families of the young people involved, Mr. Dees said.

Two of the seven defendants in the suit have been charged. Deryl Dedmon, the man believed to be driving the pickup, faces capital murder charges, which require that a murder be committed in connection with another felony — the alleged theft of Mr. Anderson’s phone, ring and wallet.

Mr. Dedmon, 19, is being held without bond. A preliminary hearing set for Tuesday was postponed. He has said that Mr. Anderson’s death was an accident. John A. Rice, 18, who was in a second car, is charged with assault and has been released on bond.

Mr. Anderson, 48, died shortly after 5 a.m. on June 26. He had been leaving a motel, and had either lost his keys or locked them in his truck, the police said. Images from a security video show two carloads of teenagers driving into the parking lot. Some of them jumped out and approached Mr. Anderson, who was beaten and robbed. As Mr. Anderson staggered along a grassy strip at the edge of a parking lot, a teenager driving a Ford pickup truck backed up and then accelerated forward, running over and killing him, the investigators said.

The lawsuit makes public for the first time the names of all seven people who had piled into the two vehicles that night, charging that while some were directly responsible for

assaulting and killing Mr. Anderson, others were negligent because they acted as lookouts and did not try to help Mr. Anderson.

One of the people yelled “white power” during the attack, and others used a racial slur and bragged about the killing, according to the investigators.

The district attorney for Hinds County, Robert Shuler Smith, has said he will try to implicate other teenagers when he takes the case to a grand jury, expected to happen this month.

The F.B.I. has also gotten involved, with civil rights investigators helping Mr. Smith piece together the case, which was hampered early on by missing evidence and holes in some initial police work.

Mr. Smith has said he intends to prosecute the case as a hate crime, which comes into play during the sentencing phase. If Mr. Dedmon is convicted of capital murder and the prosecutors can prove that the crime was committed because of the victim’s race, the sentence may be doubled. The prosecutors have not decided whether to seek the death penalty for Mr. Dedmon.

The victim’s family has created the James Craig Anderson Foundation for Racial Tolerance, but has not spoken much publicly about Mr. Anderson’s death. In an interview with The New York Times last month, family members described Mr. Anderson as a good country cook, a gifted gardener and always genial. They said he liked his job on the assembly line at the Nissan plant, which he had held for about seven years.

“If you met him, the first thing you were going to see was that grand-piano smile,” said his eldest sister, Barbara Anderson Young, who is one of the plaintiffs.

James Bradfield, Mr. Anderson’s partner of 17 years, is not a plaintiff. Under Mississippi law, same-sex partners have no claim in civil actions like this, Mr. Dees said.

There was no indication that Mr. Anderson’s sexual orientation was a factor in the crime.