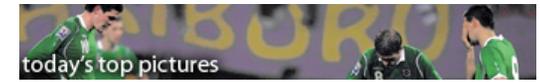


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Witness in McIlveen case 'thought teen went home'

By Maeve Connolly

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YOUNG people who ran into a garden and barred the gate moments before Michael McIlveen was attacked

“did not realise” the Ballymena teenager had been left out in the alley, Antrim Crown Court has heard.

Giving evidence yesterday at the trial of five people charged with murder and a sixth who faces lesser charges, a

witness said he thought that when Michael and a friend had walked up the alley after a fight with one of the

because they had been heading home.

Christopher McNeill told the court that a person identified to him as Jeff Lewis had traded blows with Michael and then asked: "Michael can I speak to you round the corner here?" but the teenager replied: "Naw, naw, leave me alone" and "walked round the corner so I thought... [he was] heading home".

The witness said that after he and several others had closed the gate

behind them "we heard a big thud of them trying to get in but then they must've found Michael out there so they got him instead...".

In video-taped evidence played to the court the 18-year-old explained that as he saw Michael and his friend walk away he turned to go back into the Granville Drive property but "there was boys coming up the alley so there was, about 15 boys and at the front I seen Christopher Kerr...".

He described Mr Kerr (22) from

Carnduff Drive in the town as wearing a "white hoodie" and said he had not recognised anyone else.

Mr McNeill said the people in the

garden were hoping the boys would go away but did not realise that Michael McIlveen and a witness who cannot be identified were still out there. He said a person with a baseball bat then started trying to get through the gate.

Mr McNeill said that he went out to the alley where Michael was "holding his face".

"There was a brave bit of blood. I thought maybe it was like a burst lip or something," he said.

The court heard him claim that Mr Lewis (19), of Rossdale in Ballymena, had been accompanied by a second person who was speaking on his

mobile phone and asked one of the young people who had come out from the garden to tell the caller "I'm at the cinema".

Mr McNeill said that a witness who has already given evidence had run into the alley five minutes after Michael – and "a couple of minutes" before Mr Lewis and his friend – and asked them: "Boys why, why did youse run? They weren't going to touch you, they know me".

Under cross-examination from a lawyer acting for Mr Lewis, the witness agreed that Michael had hit his client first "in the face", Mr Lewis did not have a weapon and there had been "a stampede" among the young people to get back in the gate.

Mr McNeill also agreed that the second person had stood at a distance from Mr Lewis during the initial fight with Michael and the time between the gate being closed and the start of the attack on it had been very brief.

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