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With 3 words, Shelton case is over

‘Guilty, your honor,’ former teacher says in attack on teenager in St. Clair County.

By Nicholas J.C. Pistor
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BELLEVILLE • Samson Shelton stood before the judge’s bench, one on one, with Ashley Reeves watching from the back of the courtroom.

“What would your plea be to the charge of first-degree attempted murder?” Circuit Judge Milton Wharton asked.

The former teacher stood straight, his head up, eyes forward.

“Guilty, your honor,” Shelton said, in clear, strong voice.

The yearlong legal struggle over whether Shelton tried to kill a Millstadt teenager was finished.

The judge then asked whether Shelton wanted to make a statement.

“No, your honor,” Shelton said. There would be no apology.

Per a plea agreement with prosecutors, the judge sentenced Shelton, 27, to 20 years in prison. He must serve 17 years — 85 percent of the sentence — before being eligible for parole.

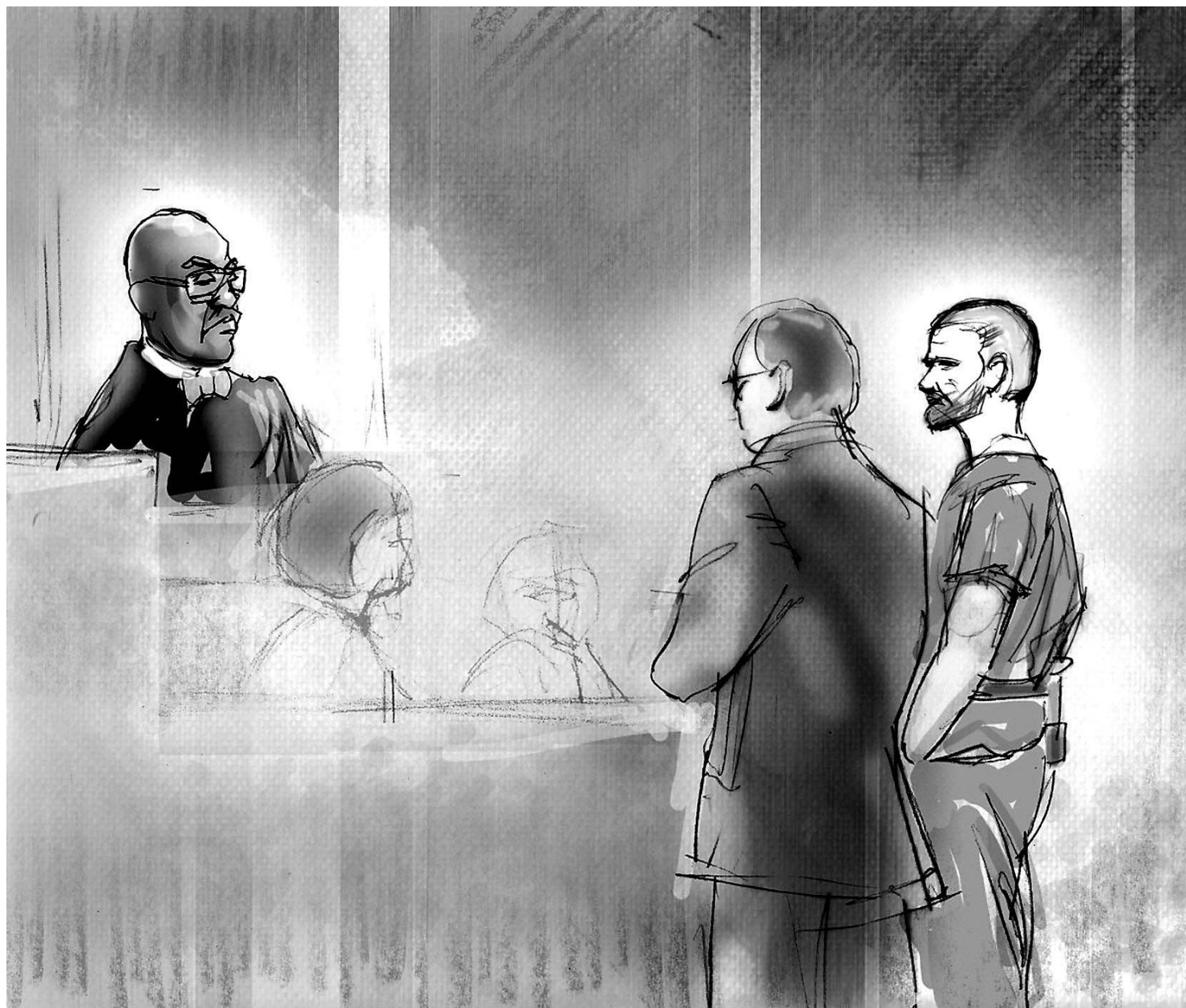
If the case had gone to trial, prosecutors would have sought what they called an “enhanced sentence” of up to 60 years for Shelton because of the heinous and brutal nature of the attack. Shelton still faces battery charges involving a brawl with police officers after an attempted suicide last month.

There was a tense moment when it appeared the deal could have been off the table.

The judge asked Shelton whether he had been threatened in the course of making his plea. He said “yes” — that his family and friends had been threatened by the Reeves family, and by others online.

After clarification, Shelton said his plea wasn’t based on any alleged intimidation. The judge accepted that explanation.

Now, Shelton will enter the



Samson Shelton during a hearing Friday with Circuit Judge Milton Wharton at which he pleaded guilty. Sketch by Kevin Belford

Illinois Department of Corrections and will most likely be transported to maximum security at the Menard Correctional Center near Chester — a stark contrast to a classroom at Freeburg High, a suburban school where the former teacher taught drivers education.

Ashley Reeves, then 17, was reported missing in April last year. During a frantic search and after hours of questioning, Shelton led sheriff’s investigators — in a drizzling rain — to her nearly lifeless body in a Belleville park. Her neck was crooked, her body was covered in mud, and she was covered with insect bites.

Investigators said Shelton later that night described to them the popping sound made by Reeves’ neck when he said he tried to eject her from his car during a quarrel. The statement — along with Reeves’ discovery — was documented on video and released by a judge to the news media this year.

The case made national headlines and hit a fever pitch among local residents — especially those living in the small towns of western St. Clair County.

The former teacher was charged with one count of attempted murder. Prosecutors had originally charged Shelton

with two counts of attempted murder and one count of aggravated kidnapping, but a grand jury dropped two charges.

Robert Haida, the St. Clair County state’s attorney, said the sentence is “serious time.” He added that the plea agreement will help Ashley Reeves move on with her life.

“I’m glad it’s over with,” said Reeves, who continues to undergo rehabilitation and plans to go to college. “I just want to continue with my life and not worry about it.”

After the proceedings, Shelton’s mother, Susan, decried what she called the “continuing

demonization of Sam.”

She added, “It was guaranteed that Sam couldn’t get a fair trial anyway.”

In interviews with the Post-Dispatch last month, his family repeatedly denied that Shelton tried to kill Reeves. They said it was an accident — that Shelton panicked when he heard the girl’s neck snap as he tried to pull her out of his car.

Clyde Kuehn, Shelton’s defense attorney, said his client was “at peace to have it over with.”

Angie Leventis of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.

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