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EXCLUSIVE: JAY, KEY WITNESS FROM 'SERIAL' TELLS HIS STORY FOR



Natasha Vargas-Cooper

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On Jan. 13, 1999, Hae Min Lee, an 18-year-old high school student from Baltimore, went missing. About a month later, [police uncovered](#) her body in a nearby park; an autopsy would later find that she was choked to death. Lee's ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed, 17, became the primary suspect in her homicide after an anonymous caller told the police to investigate him. In February of 2000, Syed was found guilty of murdering Lee. Syed is currently serving a life sentence.

The star witness at Syed's trial was Jay Wilds, a former classmate who testified that he helped Syed dispose of Lee's body. Jay's testimony was critical to the state's case; indeed, without his testimony it's virtually impossible that the state could have even brought Syed to trial.

Syed's trial, and Jay's testimony, became the focus of a "This American Life" spinoff series, the 12-part podcast "Serial," broadcast in the fall of this year.

Jay chose not to be formally interviewed by either "This American Life" or by "Serial" host and producer, Sarah Koenig. In the podcast Koenig pointedly challenged Jay's account of events and his motivation for assisting Adnan. Jay feels strongly that he was unfairly depicted by

Koenig and that she painted a highly misleading portrayal of him and his role in the case.

This interview is the first time Jay has spoken publicly about events surrounding Lee's death and the trial that ended in Syed's conviction. We met over the weekend at his two-story suburban home. Jay's wife and mother entertained the couple's young children while Jay and I spoke in the family living room.

This is the first part in a multipart interview. The following has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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How old were you when you first met Adnan Syed?

It was just at the end of my junior year, so about 16. I knew him because I knew Muslims in the community from playing basketball at the mosque.

In "Serial" you are depicted as a petty weed dealer. Is that why you didn't initially cooperate with the police? It doesn't seem like enough of a reason to not talk to the police.

It wasn't just like I was selling a nickel bag here and there. At the time, this was Maryland in the '90s, the drug laws were extremely serious. I saw the ATF and DEA take down guys in my neighborhood for selling much less than I was at the time. And they were getting sentenced to three and five years. I also ran the operation out of my grandmother's house and that also put my family at risk. I had a lot more on the line than just a few bags of weed.

The other thing to understand is something about the culture of Baltimore – this is where the ['Stop Snitching' video comes from](#). This is where it was produced. It went national, but it was produced in Baltimore. This is where people would have their house firebombed and still tell the police they knew nothing about it rather than to try to make some sense of what's going on. And that's not necessarily me – but that is my family, that is my uncles and cousins. It's where I'm from.

What was your life like during 1998 and 1999?

I worked a lot. I rode BMX freestyle. Got called an Oreo. I had friends but the groups were small. Never really a big group of friends. I played

lacrosse, was a bit of a jock. The group of people I hung out with were different from the group of people I was from. I went to concerts, like anything from Wu-Tang to Warped Tour. I was a bit of an outdoorsman, adventure seeker, fishing, camping, learned to ride a motorcycle. Went canoeing. By the time I graduated [Woodlawn] high school in 1998, I wasn't exactly angry, but I *did* resent the school.

Why?

When Woodlawn put in the magnet thing, they took out all the vocational classes. Before you would just go down there for drafting, shop, and everyone would co-mingle, and all the students interacted. But when they put the magnet wing in, it was kinda like 'these people were different from us.' And they didn't have to interact with us anymore. They didn't have to go by us, except to come to lunch, and that was it. But their gym, lockers, parking, was down in the magnet wing. And I found that to be a bit of a slap in the face. Because I knew football had paid for all of that, but there were few football players down there. Football paid for everything at the school.

I didn't resent the students, I resented the school for setting it up like that.

When was the first time you hung out with Adnan?

I met him while I was still at Woodlawn, so around 1998. Stephanie [Jay's girlfriend] came to me and said 'Adnan is pretty cool,' plus he wanted to buy some weed. I said, 'Isn't he a paramedic?' And she said, 'Nah, he's cool, plus he wants to buy.'

I didn't trust him at first, since he wasn't like the people I knew – pot smokers you know? I made him smoke one time, he got a little high, got a little weird. Didn't say that much. He just seemed like someone who didn't smoke weed too much. He had a professional job in high school, he was a paramedic or something [*Ed. note: Adnan worked as an emergency medical technician, not a paramedic.*]

From your perspective, what was Adnan's reputation at Woodlawn?

He was a little pompous, a little arrogant, but he seemed really driven as far as his academics, but all those magnet students were. He was magnet. He seemed a little bit more uptight than the other Muslim kids that I knew. He seemed under a lot of pressure to please. I got the

feeling the few times of interacting with Adnan that there was this enormous pressure from somewhere trying to make him into something he didn't want to be.

When did you two get closer to each other?

There was never a real friendship. I only smoked with him two or three times. It wasn't like, 'Oh, we're down in the park, come on down.' We were friendly, we were cool. I might have sat next to him in a class, and joked or something. But he didn't call me unless he needed something. It wasn't like, 'Oh, we're going bowling, and let's call it in before we go bowling and call the rest of our friends and call Jay.' I don't remember ever going to any kinds of functions or endeavors together, or any concerts or clubs together, you know.

What did you know about Adnan and his relationship with Hae Min Lee?

I think that was his first real girlfriend, and I think that's why his reaction was so strong. I don't think it meant that much to her. I don't think that's wrong, it's high school, you know. She's a high school girl, 'Oh, he's cute, Oh, whatever' – things fizzle out. I think there was another dude or something, or whatever. I really didn't know much about their relationship, if they hung out, where they hung out, when they hung out.

How do you remember Hae?

For our age group, she was really independent. I believe she had a job also. But she seemed to be more mature, like she was two, three, four years older than us. Like she was a junior in college. The way she moved and went about her day. She just seemed like an older chick who happened to be in high school. She also wasn't on the magnet side of the demographic.

When did he first talk to you about hurting her?

It was at least a week before she died, when he found out she was either cheating on him or leaving him. We were in the car, we were riding, smoking. He just started opening up. It's in the evening after school, we never hung out in the morning. Just normal conversation like, 'I think she's fucking around. I'm gonna kill that bitch, man.' Nothing real pointed or anything, not like, 'I know his name,' or 'I caught her.' But I just thought he was just shooting off like everyone

else shoots off when they're mad at their girlfriend. He never said anything like, 'Hey, what gauge gun should I use?' or 'How many minutes am I supposed to hold somebody under the water for?' or, 'Is there a statute of limitation on murder?' I thought he was just blowing off steam and bullshitting. I thought at worst he'd throw a rock through her window or something. Normal high school 'I'm mad at her and I'll scratch her car' sort of stuff.

I had never known anybody who had killed anybody else, so there's no way I could have known.

But look, if we start speculating what he was thinking that far ahead – I don't know. He might really have just been bullshitting at the time. I don't know what happened, what occurred between them that day. I don't know if she said something he couldn't handle, and he went off the edge or if he had been seriously speculating about it. I don't feel comfortable drawing conclusions like that. You can't start drawing conclusions like that.

A big part of the 'Serial' podcast is to speculate on Adnan's motive. What do you think?

I don't necessarily know if he meant to kill Hae before he did it or if it was a sudden moment thing, but looking at his life, from what I saw, he seemed to be far out of his realm when it came to Hae leaving him.

From the way he carried himself, at least, it looked like he had never lost anything before. And it was really hard for him to deal with being on the losing end. In that situation, he was the loser. And people were starting to find out he was a loser, 'Oh, you and Hae aren't together anymore. She got a new boyfriend?' And he didn't know how to deal with that.

And the other thing about it, I mean, there looked like there was real hurt and pain. What else could motivate you to choke the life out of someone you cared about? He just couldn't come to grips with those feelings. However he ended up doing it – whether it was premeditated, an involuntary reaction at that point in time – he just couldn't come to grips with being a loser and failing. He failed; he lost the girl.

I know that he came from a very strict religious background and that he was uneasy with some of the things he was doing. He was having a hard enough time with that itself. There were some big forces going on that didn't have anything to do with Hae.

But, like I said, I don't know how to come up with this story about how Adnan did it, why he did it, what he was thinking, how he was thinking, and why he was thinking that. I'm not a lawyer and I'm not a cop. It's not my job to figure that out.

When Adnan loaned you his car on Jan. 13, 1999, did he tell you it was because he planned on murdering Hae?

No. I didn't know that he planned to murder her that day. I didn't think he was going to go kill her. We were in the car together during last period – he was ditching the last period. And I said, 'Hey, I need to run to the mall 'cause I need to get a gift for Stephanie.'

He said then, 'No, I gotta go do something. I'm going to be late for practice, so just drop me off. Take my car, take my cellphone. I'll call you from someone else's phone when I'm done.'

I said, 'Alright, cool.' I dropped him off at school, went to the mall, then when I was done, I go back to my friend Jenn's house, where I normally go, sit and smoke with my friend.

Then he calls me and says, 'Come pick me up.'

So I go to pick him up, and when I get there he says, 'Oh shit, I did it.' I say, 'Did what?' He says, 'I killed Hae.'

At the Best Buy?

Yes.

Is this when you first saw Hae's body in the trunk of her car?

No. I saw her body later, in front of of my grandmother's house where I was living. I didn't tell the cops it was in front of my house because I didn't want to involve my grandmother. I believe I told them it was in front of 'Cathy's [not her real name] house, but it was in front of my grandmother's house. I know it didn't happen anywhere other than my grandmother's house. I remember the highway traffic to my right, and I remember standing there on the curb. I remember Adnan standing next to me.

Let's back up, tell me what happened when you arrived at the Best Buy to pick up Adnan.

I pick him up – he doesn't have any car with him. Like, he's not in a car or anything.

Where was Hae's car? Was it in the Best Buy parking lot?

Hae's car could have been in the parking lot, but I didn't know what it looked like so I don't remember. When I pick him up at Best Buy, he's telling me her car is somewhere there, and that he did this in the parking lot. But that, according to what I learned later, is probably not what happened.

Wherever her car was at the time I picked him up from Best Buy, it probably stayed there until he picked me up later that evening.

Then what happens, and what time is it roughly?

It's starting to get dark, so between 3p.m. and 4p.m. We drive over to Cathy's house to smoke. Cathy has people over when we get there. Now I don't wanna tell the people at Cathy's that this guy I'm with just killed his girlfriend and the cops just called because then they would all be a part of this fucked up thing.

Who was at the Cathy's apartment?

Cathy, Jeff, Laura and Jenn.

Ok, so you arrive at Cathy's with Adnan after he tells you he murdered Hae?

Yeah. We're sitting there smoking and he receives a phone call from the police and gets all panicky. I say, 'Well we need to part ways.' I don't remember if he dropped me off at my house or if I got a ride from somebody else.

What time do you get back to your place?

I think – and, look, it's been 15 years – about 6 p.m.

Ok. So then you and Adnan parted ways?

Yes. He left in his car and I was trying to collect myself at my [grandmother's] house. I was pretty distraught, fucked up, feeling guilty for not saying nothing. I don't know whether he calls me when he's on his way back to my house, or if he calls me right outside the house. He calls me and says 'I'm outside,' so I come outside to talk to him and followed him to a different car, not his. He said, 'You've gotta help me, or I'm gonna tell the cops about you and the weed and all that shit.' And then he popped the trunk and I saw Hae's body. She looked kinda purple, blue, her legs were tucked behind her, she had stockings on,

none of her clothes were removed, nothing like that. She didn't look beat up.

Hae was in the trunk of her own car?

Yes.

Ok. Then what happened?

Adnan says, 'Just help me dig the hole.' And I'm still thinking, 'Inner-city black guy, selling pot to high school kids.' The cops are going to fry me. They're gonna pin me to the fucking wall. I had cops show up and harass me before at my house. I told [Adnan] that I wouldn't touch her car, or any of her possessions, and I say, 'Fuck it. I'll help you dig the hole.'

Why did you agree to help Adnan bury Hae?

Because at the time I was convinced that I would be going to jail for a long time if he turned me in for drug dealing, especially to high school kids. I was also running [drug] operations from my grandmother's house. So that would ruin her life too. I was also around a bunch of people earlier the day [at Cathy's], and I didn't want them to get fucked up with homicide. So I said, 'Look man, I'm not touching [Hae]. You're in this on your own. I'm being manipulated into what's being done right now.'

Did you go to Leakin Park immediately after agreeing to help?

No. Adnan left and then returned to my house several hours later, closer to midnight in his own car. He came back with no tools or anything. He asked me if I had shovels, so I went inside my house and got some gardening tools. We got in his car and start driving. I asked him where we're going and he says, 'Didn't you say everyone gets dumped in Leakin Park?'

I said, 'Drug dealers, people who get killed by drug dealers,' and I'm thinking to myself, 'When did I ever say that?' So, as I'm riding with him to the park and it starts raining and I'm thinking to myself as he pulls over – and I'm thinking this is the spot he's chosen. I'm also thinking, 'What's making him think I'm totally okay with this?' Like if a car goes by, and I jump out and wave at them saying, 'Hey, this is a murderer right here.' But I didn't. I'm pretty sure it was my fear of going to prison for having a bunch of weed in my grandma's house. He knew I was afraid of that.

Did you and Adnan dig the grave?

Yes we dig for about 40 minutes and we dig and dig, and he's digging less and less. And at a certain point I say, 'Well fuck, I'm finished. I'm fucking done.' And Adnan's like, 'Oh, well, you're not going to help me move her are you?' And I'm like 'No, I'm not gonna help you move her.' He says, 'Ok, well, I'm gonna need you to drive back to her car.'

Where was Hae's car?

Somewhere up around a corner up a hill, parked in a strange neighborhood. It's just on the street. I didn't know it was that close. He said, 'I'm gonna drive back down there [to the grave]. You follow me some of the way, and then I'll take care of it.'

You drove him to Hae's car nearby?

Yes. We get into his car, and he drives up around the corner to Hae's car. He says, 'OK, follow me halfway back down the hill [towards the grave site],' so he doesn't have to walk all the way back up the hill to get back to me in his car. I follow him halfway back down the hill, park, smoke some cigarettes. He's gone with Hae's car.

It takes him about half an hour, 45 minutes, and he comes back with gloves on, panting, like, 'She was really heavy.' That's all he says. That's about burying her.

Adnan had just buried Hae on his own?

Yes. When we were digging the hole, it's not like Hae's body was just lying next to us. She was still in the trunk.

OK. Then what?

And he's like, 'I've gotta put her car somewhere.' So I follow him around for a few minutes, and he just picks a place at random behind some row houses, leaves her car, gets into his car, takes me home.

Why is this story different from what you originally told the police? Why has your story changed over time?

Well first of all, I wasn't openly willing to cooperate with the police. It wasn't until they made it clear they weren't interested in my 'procurement' of pot that I began to open up any. And then I would only give them information pertaining to my interaction with someone or where I was. They had to chase me around before they could corner

me to talk to me, and there came a point where I was just sick of talking to them. And they wouldn't stop interviewing me or questioning me. I wasn't fully cooperating, so if they said, 'Well, we have on phone records that you talked to Jenn.' I'd say, 'Nope, I didn't talk to Jenn.' Until Jenn told me that she talked with the cops and that it was ok if I did too.

I stonewalled them that way. No – until they told me they weren't trying to prosecute me for selling weed, or trying to get any of my friends in trouble. People had lives and were trying to get into college and stuff like that. Getting them in trouble for anything that they knew or that I had told them – I couldn't have that.

I guess I was being kind of a jury on whether or not people needed to be involved or whatever, but these people didn't have anything to do with it, and I knew they didn't have anything to do with it.

That's the best way I can account for the inconsistencies. Once the police made it clear that my drug dealing wasn't gonna affect the outcome of what was going on, I became a little bit more transparent.

Did you make the anonymous call to the police to tip them off about Adnan?

No.

Do you know who did?

I don't know. But there was a grand jury hearing on this case, and I have an idea who might have based on that hearing.

COMING NEXT: [PART 2](#), Jay's theory on the anonymous caller, why he agreed to testify in the state's case against Adnan, and how "Serial" showed up at his front door.

Correction: The original version of this story incorrectly stated that Adnan Syed went to trial in December 2000. Syed was actually convicted in February 2000. A December 1999 trial ended in mistrial.

[Matt Tinoco](#) provided research for this interview.

Photo: *Natasha Vargas-Cooper for The Intercept*

CONTACT THE AUTHOR:



Natasha Vargas-Cooper

✉ natashavc@theintercept.org

🐦 [@natashavc](https://twitter.com/natashavc)

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