

Details emerge about botched murder-for-hire plot

By [Tim O'Melia](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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The former owner of a car dealership held meetings in a Denny's restaurant and a mall food court trying to recruit hit men to kill his ex-wife, Heather Grossman, so he could get his three children back.

Ronald Samuels, then of Boca Raton, spread \$20,000 among three men before he found a small-time drug dealer and his occasional runner to execute his plan.

The actual trigger man didn't know he would be wielding the high-powered rifle until the morning of the hit. He and his partner hadn't discussed it.

Police interviews and court documents released this week reveal a South Florida version of the gang that couldn't shoot straight. Heather Grossman, now 38, was struck in the neck and paralyzed by a single bullet and her new husband, John Grossman, the son of a then-part owner of the Minnesota Vikings professional football team, was slightly wounded by a second round as they accelerated from the Yamato Road and Federal Highway intersection Oct. 14, 1997.

"Do it now, do it now," driver Eddie Stafford yelled at his partner, Roger Runyon, as they sat in a green Ford Thunderbird in the next lane and behind the Grossmans' Lincoln.

"Just hold it a minute," Runyon said to driver Eddie Stafford, according to a statement he gave to Boca Raton detectives. He stuck the rifle out of the car window and fired. Then he fired again.

Runyon thought he had missed. It wasn't until several hours later that the pair learned that both Grossmans had been hit, but survived. They worried they would not get their full \$5,000 fee.

Runyon, 42, of Indiana, and Stafford, 50, of Hollywood, are two of the five hitman recruits who will get immunity from prosecution for their testimony against Samuels, 56. A trial date has not yet been set.

Others who gave statements against Samuels are his longtime friend Hugh Estess, who owned the green T-bird, Geoffrey Pollock, who provided Samuels with an alibi by driving around with him on the day of the shooting, and Willie Span, an oft-convicted drug dealer who was supposed to be one of the original shooters.

The shooters forgot to cover the license plate, allowing police to find the T-bird later the day of the shooting and leading to the eventual unraveling of the scheme by detectives.

Samuels sits without bail in the Palm Beach County Jail, charged with two counts of attempted first degree murder, four of solicitation to commit first degree murder and one count each of conspiracy, shooting into a occupied vehicle and felony causing bodily harm.

Samuels fled the country in 1998 just before he was indicted but was arrested smuggling cocaine into Mexico and spent six years in a Mexican jail. He was extradited to Palm Beach County in February.

Heather Grossman, a quadriplegic who needs a ventilator to breathe, lives in Arizona with her three children. She and John Grossman became involved in a contentious divorce themselves. He died in March.