



OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY
COUNTY OF KERN

CIVIC CENTER JUSTICE BUILDING
1215 TRUXTUN AVENUE
BAKERSFIELD, CALIFORNIA 93301
(661) 868-2340, FAX: (661) 868-2700

CYNTHIA J. ZIMMER
DISTRICT ATTORNEY

JOSEPH A. KINZEL
ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY

ANDREA S. KOHLER
ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY

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MEDIA ADVISORY

CONTACT:

Deputy DA Hunter Starr: 661-868-2759
Chief Deputy Kenneth Russell: 661-868-2313
Deputy DA Cyrus Shahbazian: 661-868-2755
Deputy DA Christine Antonios: 661-868-2726

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Kern County Juries Hand Down Guilty Verdicts In Three Separate Murder Cases
On Same Day**

Bakersfield -- Kern County District Attorney Cynthia Zimmer announced that on May 18, 2023, three separate Kern County Juries handed down verdicts finding their respective defendants guilty of murder.

People v. Andrew Barraza: BF180557A:

On May 18, 2023, the jury found the defendant, Andrew Barraza, guilty of First-Degree Murder and found true that Barraza personally used a firearm during the commission of the murder. Additionally, jurors found Barraza guilty of being a felon in unlawful possession of a firearm. Deputy DDA Hunter Starr presented the case to the jury.

Just before midnight on March 10, 2020, defendant Andrew Barraza got into a verbal confrontation with victim, Javier Rodriguez, as the two entered the AM/PM convenience store at the corner of Brundage and South H Street, in Bakersfield. From the verbal confrontation, Barraza lured Rodriguez to the street in an apparent challenge to a fist fight. However, before any fighting occurred, Barraza waited for his associates to pull up nearby in their vehicle, and Barraza quickly produced a handgun, firing three shots at Rodriguez and fled the scene. Rodriguez suffered a gunshot wound to the chest and died on the scene. Investigators with the Bakersfield Police Department identified Barraza as the shooter and issued a warrant for his arrest. Barraza was arrested by the Kern County Sheriff's Department on March 29, 2020.

The conviction for First-Degree Murder along with the firearm enhancement that the jury handed down is eligible for sentencing of up to 50 years-to-life in prison. Additional hearings before the judge on the case are scheduled for May 22, 2023, at which time a sentencing date is expected to be set.

People v. George Richard Smith: BF181640A:

On May 18, 2023, the jury found the defendant, George Richard Smith, guilty of the Second-Degree Murder of his wife, Arson of an Inhabited Building, and Reckless Evasion of a Peace Officer.

In the early morning hours of June 30, 2020, Richard Smith murdered his wife of 36 years while she was in bed in their Ridgecrest home. In an attempt to conceal evidence of the murder, Smith set fires in two locations in their shared home, and then fled the scene. The Kern County Fire Department extinguished the blaze within thirty minutes and soon after located the victim, Vicki Smith, deceased in the primary bedroom of the house. Homicide detectives from the Ridgecrest Police Department and Kern County Arson Investigators investigated the case.

Ridgecrest Police Department officers located Richard Smith later in the same day, and Smith fled from officers at speeds exceeding eighty miles per hour while driving in a residential area near downtown Ridgecrest. Soon after, assisting deputies from the Kern County Sheriff's Department located Smith at a nearby gas station and took him into custody. Smith testified at the trial and claimed that he was drunk and took sleeping medication prior to the crimes and thus asserted that he was unable to remember anything about the Murder, Arson, or high-speed chase in an effort to avoid accountability for the murder. The case was presented by Chief Trial Deputy Kenneth Russell and Deputy District Attorney Cyrus Shahbazian.

Sentencing on the case has been scheduled for June 15, 2023 in Department 6 of the Kern County Superior Court before the Honorable Judge John Brownlee. Smith faces a sentence exceeding 15 years-to-life in prison for the convictions.

People v. Jose William Lara: BF189541A

On May 18, 2023, the jury found the defendant, Jose William Lara, guilty of the First-Degree Murder of Desiree Thompson. Deputy District Attorney Christine Antonios presented the trial evidence that led to the conviction.

On January 7, 2012, Desiree Thompson went missing and the investigation into her death went cold for ten years after no leads developed to find her whereabouts. Ms. Thompson had left her home at 6:00 p.m. that night to visit a friend and last spoke to her mother around 8:30 p.m.. Desiree's mother asked Desiree to call again when she got home safely, but that phone call never came, and Desiree Thompson was never heard from again.

There was no new information on the disappearance for almost a decade, until two informants came forward with information about who had murdered Ms. Thompson. The informants reported that Lara had confessed to them what he had done in 2012 and they were able to assist law enforcement by providing invaluable leads that helped to solve the case.

With the assistance of the Federal Bureau of Investigations, Edwards Air Force Base, the Kern Regional Crime Lab, and the Department of Justice, the California City Police Department was able to establish that Lara killed Desiree with DNA and other forensic science evidence. The evidence at trial established that Lara had met Desiree as she walked home and taken her back to his home, where he killed her. Lara then disposed of Desiree's body in his backyard, where her remains were ultimately located by law enforcement.

Lara faces a sentence of up to 25 years-to-life for the conviction. Sentencing has been scheduled for June 16, 2023 in Department 18 of the Kern County Superior Court before the Honorable Judge Michael

Bush.

District Attorney Cynthia Zimmer commented on the verdicts, stating; “It is essential that increased violent crime rates are countered with effective prosecution. These murder verdicts reflect the dedication that prosecutors in the DA’s Homicide Unit have toward seeking justice for victims of violent crime. Whether it is a cold-case murder from a decade ago, a domestic violence homicide and cover-up, or a shooting on city streets, the DA’s Homicide Unit is hard at work putting killers behind bars and providing justice to victims and their families.”