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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Re: Souliotes Plea in Murder Case

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Modesto, California - Stanislaus County District Attorney Birgit Fladager announced today that the torturous appellate journey of the case of the People v. George Souliotes has come to a conclusion with Souliotes entering pleas to three counts of involuntary manslaughter some 13 years after a prior jury convicted him of arson and three counts of first degree murder. The evidence, the trial and appellate process, and the final outcome are detailed below.

During the early morning hours on January 15, 1997 a witness near the property located at 1319 Ronald Avenue located in the City of Modesto observed a very distinctive Winnebago motorhome drive by several times. The witness estimated that the Winnebago drove by the Ronald property between 10 and 15 times over a ninety-minute period of time. The eyewitness observed the Winnebago park directly across the street from the house and the driver got out. The eyewitness saw the driver walk across the street to the rear of the 1319 Ronald property carrying a white bag like a pillow case with something inside of it. The driver was behind the house for several minutes and returned to the Winnebago empty-handed. The driver drove the Winnebago under the eyewitness's balcony and drove away. The eyewitness saw the Winnebago return almost immediately from the direction it had just gone and then slowed down in the intersection. The eyewitness observed the driver, who was the sole occupant, lean forward and turn his head towards the 1319 Ronald house. As the driver leaned forward, the eyewitness saw the driver's face illuminated from a streetlight near the intersection. As the eyewitness turned to see what the driver was looking at, she observed flames erupt from the rear of the house at 1319 Ronald—the house that the driver had just been behind. The eyewitness would later identify the driver under oath as George Souliotes who was the owner and landlord of 1319 Ronald Street.

In the house at the time of the fire were Michelle Jones (thirty years old), her son Daniel Jones, Jr. (six years old), and her daughter Amanda Jones (three years old). All three would die from the fire. The responding firefighters described the fire as unusual, and something not experienced before... it burned faster, in odd ways and didn't seem right. Experienced fire investigators found no accidental cause for the fire and no non-arson explanation for how the fire had burned

in the garage and living room/kitchen areas in a similar fashion given that the two parts of the house were separated by a fire wall. The investigators determined that the cause of the fire was arson and resulted from a poured liquid accelerant. Samples submitted to the Department of Justice confirmed the presence of accelerants. An independent fire investigator for the insurance company agreed with these findings. George Souliotes was found to own the distinctive Winnebago, which was also identified by the eyewitness, used in the arson. The defendant was having problems with the tenants of the 1319 Ronald property. The defendant had obtained a judgment to evict the family, but was contacted on the 14th and told that his paperwork was defective and that he would have to start over. Another independent eyewitness observed the defendant argue with victim Michelle Jones less than 48 hours before the fire and testified that the defendant was driving the same distinctive Winnebago at the time.

Souliotes was charged with the murders of Michelle, Daniel and Amanda for setting the fire that burned down the 1319 Ronald Avenue property. In 2000, the defendant was convicted by a jury of his peers of arson and murder based on the evidence described above. In 2002, his conviction was affirmed by California's Fifth District Court of Appeals. The defendant filed a petition for review with the California Supreme Court, which the court denied on October 22, 2002. In 2003, the defendant petitioned for post-conviction relief from the Stanislaus County Superior Court trial judge who had heard the evidence against him, and that petition was denied in 2004. He filed a second petition in the Court of Appeals, and that was denied in 2004. The defendant filed a third petition for post-conviction relief in the California Supreme Court which was denied in 2006. This last decision upholding the conviction resulted in all of the evidence which had been admitted into evidence against the defendant being purged from the court's files.

In 2013, a Federal District Court Judge granted a new trial for the defendant based on what the judge felt was inadequate legal representation at the trial held in 2000. The judge acknowledged that the defense attorney did not call defense witnesses during the trial based on the lawyer's express tactical decisions made with Souliotes's consent (which represented a change in trial strategy from a prior trial that had resulted in an 11 to 1 verdict in favor of a conviction for arson and murder), but still felt the defendant was prejudiced by being convicted. The federal judge then ordered a new trial within 90 days despite the fact that the case had been closed for 13 years.

This Office decided that justice demanded that the defendant be retried for his crimes, knowing full well the difficulties of resurrecting a 16-year-old case. Great efforts were made to locate the original witnesses and evidence in order to meet the 90-day deadline. During this time the defense filed numerous motions to exclude evidence and to have the case dismissed. The primary claim by the defense was that the Attorney General's Office had stipulated in federal court that some of the evidence used in the original trial was now disputed by changes in arson investigative knowledge. The Attorney General's Office previously advised this Office that stipulations made during proceedings by them (where the AG represents a prison Warden in a habeas corpus hearing) were not meant to be binding in any other proceedings. However, a retired judge appointed to hear this new trial disagreed. This judge felt it would be unfair to the defendant if the jury were allowed to hear all of the evidence previously admitted against him. The judge exercised his discretion and ordered that the arson experts for the People could not "express an opinion as to the cause or origin of the fire including whether the fire was accidental or the result of arson..." Furthermore, the judge decided to prevent the eyewitness from identifying the defendant as the driver of the Winnebago at the new trial. The judge's actions essentially gutted the People's case.

This Office still believes that even without an “expert opinion” a reasonable juror would believe that the fire at 1319 Ronald Avenue in 1997 was the result of arson given the other circumstantial evidence. However, based on the significant age of the case which negatively impacts witnesses’ memories and compounded by the retired judge’s adverse rulings, it seemed to be in the public good that a plea offer should be made to allow the defendant to be released after having served over 16 years in prison. Daniel Jones, Sr., the husband to Michelle and the father of Daniel, Jr. and Amanda, was informed about the offer; he was troubled that this case could come back to haunt him after all these years and was not looking forward to going through this process again. Mr. Jones, when informed that any plea would be conditioned on the defendant waiving any further appeals, asked for it to be over.

On July 2, 2013 the defendant entered pleas to and was found guilty by the court of three counts of involuntary manslaughter, one count for each victim. The defendant was sentenced to the maximum term allowed by law for each victim for a total of six years. The defendant has waived all further appellate rights so the judgment is now considered final. The factual basis provided for the plea was that the defendant “was the owner and landlord of the property located at 1319 Ronald Avenue located in the City of Modesto and had a duty to have an operable smoke alarm as required under Health & Safety Code Sec. 13113.8 in the rental property. On January 15, 1997, a fire occurred at the rental property which resulted in the deaths of Michelle Jones, Daniel Jones, Jr., and Amanda Jones. There is a factual basis to conclude that the defendant did not have an operable smoke alarm as required in the house and as a result of his negligent maintenance of the 1319 Ronald Avenue property, the three occupants died in the fire.” Given that Souliotes has already served 16 years in prison, he will be released from custody later today.

Although Souliotes has not admitted responsibility for actually setting the fire at 1319 Ronald Avenue, and this Office still believes that all the evidence supports the prior jury’s verdict of his guilt, through this disposition at least Souliotes has now finally accepted some measure of responsibility for the deaths of his three tenants.