



Office of the District Attorney Stanislaus County

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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Date: July 11, 2023
Re: Darren Lawrence Lee
Convicted Double Murder Inmate denied
parole

For More Information Contact:

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Modesto, California - Stanislaus County District Attorney Jeff Laugero announced today that Darren Lawrence Lee, age 60, of Modesto was found unsuitable for parole during a June 29, 2023, hearing of the State Board of Parole Hearings held at San Quentin Prison. Deputy District Attorney Amy Elliott Neumann appeared at the hearing to argue against Lee's release.

On June 25, 1979, Darren Lee (age 16 at the time) and his three crime partners brutally murdered Phillip and Kathryn Ranzo in their own home. Lee and his crime partners planned a home invasion robbery, which began with knocking on the door of the Ranzo home, pretending to be out of gas and asking to use the telephone. Since their telephone was out of order, Phillip Ranzo offered to give them a can of gas. Lee and his crime partners followed Mr. Ranzo into the garage where Lee then held him at gunpoint, hogtied him and put him on the garage floor. Once he was tied up, they brutally beat him over the head with a baseball bat.

Lee then entered the Ranzo home, where Kathryn Ranzo was watching TV in the living room. She was ordered at gunpoint to go to an upstairs bedroom where Lee's crime partner, Jeffrey Maria, proceeded to rape and murder her. Mrs. Ranzo was struck in the head multiple times with an axe, tortured with cuts to her eyes and face, and fatally stabbed in the throat. After that, they ransacked the Ranzo home, stealing cash and jewelry. Before leaving, one of them went back into the garage and stabbed Mr. Ranzo multiple times in the face and neck, killing him. The Ranzos' brutal murders orphaned their only child, Mark, who was ten years old at the time but not home, having spent the night with his grandparents.

Twenty-three hours before the Ranzo murders, Lee and two of his three Ranzo crime partners robbed and assaulted a caretaker of a home in Newman. Lee selected the home and planned the crime. They told the caretaker that they had run out of gas. Once inside the house, they hogtied the caretaker and beat him in the head with a revolver. They then proceeded to ransack the home, stealing multiple guns and weapons, which Lee and his crime partners used the next night at the Ranzo home.

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In 1980 the case was moved to Sacramento County on a change of venue motion. There, a jury convicted Lee of two counts of first-degree murder and one count of robbery while armed with a firearm. Originally, Lee was sentenced to life without parole, which an appellate court later deemed to be “cruel and unusual punishment” for a minor. Lee was re-sentenced and is currently serving two consecutive sentences of 25 years-to-life.

At the hearing on June 29th, Prosecutor Neumann urged the Board to deny release, arguing that Lee still posed an unreasonable risk to public safety. The sister of the victim Phillip Ranzo argued against release and also asked the Board to deny parole based on Lee’s continued minimization of his role in the crimes. After deliberations, the Board of Parole hearings agreed that despite his “youthful offender status,” Lee still presented an unreasonable risk to public safety and denied parole for a period for three years.

Prior to this, in 2019 Lee filed a petition to be resentenced under a 2019 change to California’s Felony Murder law. The Stanislaus County District Attorney vigorously opposed that petition on the basis that Lee was a major participant in the killings who acted with reckless indifference to human life. That petition was denied by Judge Oros of the Sacramento County Superior Court and is currently pending before the Court of Appeal.

This was Lee’s seventh parole hearing. In 2020, he was found unsuitable for release and given a three-year denial. His next hearing will be scheduled in 2026, however, pursuant to that Youthful Offender Legislation, he may petition the Board to advance that date if he can show he has made progress towards release.

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