

# Former fugitive gets life

<sup>Murder</sup>  
Landlord killed  
3 tenants nearly  
14 years ago

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Almost 14 years after gunning down three people who rented rooms from him on Columbia Street, Angel Rivera was sentenced Monday to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Rivera, 60, had no record and was active in the Catholic Church, his attorney said, when he had an argument with the tenants. He shot them, and drove away.

He remained a fugitive for 12 years before he was caught in November 2002 in Reading, Pa., after viewers of the TV show "America's Most Wanted" recognized him.

Rivera pleaded guilty to three counts of murder in exchange for prosecutors not seeking the death penalty. He admitted to the June 1991 slayings of 23-year-old Jose Rodriguez, his wife, Sandra Ortiz, 19, and their uncle, Geronimo Aragon, 44.

Rivera held his head down and looked away Monday as Ana Rodriguez of Santa Cruz, Jose Rodriguez's sister, cried and said God would have to forgive him because she could not.

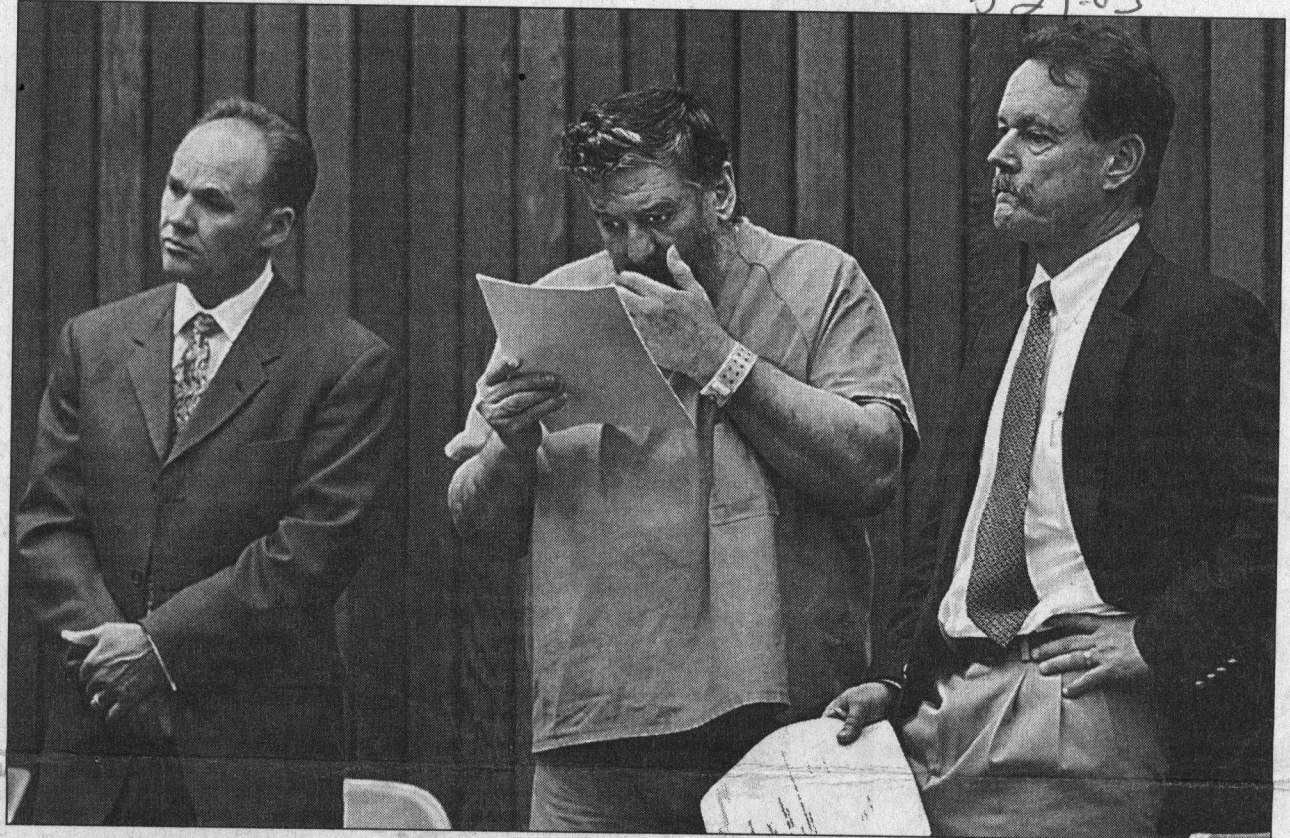
Rodriguez said her oldest nephew, a toddler, screamed for his mother and father after the shooting, asking "Where are you mama? Where are you papa?" She said her father "died of pure sadness" after the murders.

"He has destroyed my family," Rodriguez said.

Police say Rivera's neighbors had complained about cars in various stages of disrepair in the driveway and that an argument with his tenants about the cars "got out of hand."

Tom Wallraff, one of Rivera's public defenders, said his client had been a hard-working, charitable man who had no contact with police until the murders. Rivera, born into poverty in Puerto Rico, came to the United States as a teen, worked at a tannery and eventually bought property. But a back injury suffered in his 40s sent Rivera into a downward spiral, the attorney said.

"Five minutes in 1991 destroyed many lives," he said. "Mr. Rivera's family as well as been greatly affected. I wanted the court to know that this was aberr-



5-24-03

Angel Rivera, at left, has a word with attorney Tom Wallraff. Rivera, convicted of three murders in Santa Cruz 14 years ago, was sentenced to life in prison Monday. Above, Rivera reviews the conditions of his sentence.

Dan Coyro/  
Sentinel photos

rational behavior for Mr. Rivera ... and that he is very sorry. He hopes to continue to attempt to atone for his behavior and is prepared to accept the penalty today."

Rivera did not look at the Rodriguez family in the audience. He did not speak.

After Rivera's case was aired on "America's Most Wanted," a co-worker at a mobile-home assembly plant recognized him, as did a police officer who knew his landlord. Rivera was living

under the name of Wilfredo Robles.

He was arrested at his small home in Pennsylvania after a five-hour standoff, during which he swallowed two bottles of Tylenol and alcohol. He was unconscious when found. He has asked to be imprisoned in Pennsylvania.

Rivera had also lived in East Chicago, Ind., and was a suspect there in the 1999 strangulation of his girlfriend, Myra Guzman.

Rodriguez thanked those who helped bring Rivera to justice.

"I'm glad he's here," she said.

Several Santa Cruz police officers attended Monday's hearing, including Police Chief Howard Skerry, who worked on the case as a detective, and Lt. Rudy Escalante, who helped get the show on "America's Most Wanted" and traveled to show headquarters in Washington, D.C., to take phone calls.

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