

Teacher's aide pleads guilty in 2 murders



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Flanked by attorneys George Gigarjian and Peter Leeming, admitted killer Dennis Richesin pleads guilty to killing two women.

The victims



PEREIRA



REBER

Fellow inmate assaults killer in courtroom

By JASON SCHULTZ
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SANTA CRUZ — Dennis Lee Richesin pleaded guilty Thursday to murdering two women and burying their bodies near a South County high school.

Richesin, 49, made the plea after prosecutors agreed not to seek the death penalty. Instead he will spend the rest of his life in prison with no possibility of parole.

In court Thursday, he admitted to killing 25-year-old Heather Nicole Pereira-Merchant of Watsonville in August 2000, and bludgeoning 21-year-old Kelly Ann Reber to death on March 31, 2001.

Reber, a San Jose resident, attended Sequel High School.

Richesin led detectives to the bodies

of both women in May 2001. He had buried them in the woods near Renaissance High School, between La Selva Beach and Watsonville. He worked there as a teacher's aide.

"We're surprised it came this early," Reber's uncle, James Reber, said of the plea. "But we're grateful it's over. It saves everybody a lot of pain. We still miss Kelly very much. But we are very satisfied with the sentence. It was exactly appropriate."

Lucy Rodriguez, Pereira's cousin, said the two families are helping each other to heal.

In a bizarre twist, another inmate, in the courtroom for an unrelated case, jumped Richesin at the end of the hearing. He pummeled Richesin as guards and lawyers struggled to pull the men apart.

Richesin had been set to face trial in

November, but prosecutor Christine McGuire said Richesin's attorneys, George Gigarjian and Peter Leeming, approached her a few weeks ago with a plea deal: a guilty plea in exchange for life in prison.

McGuire said District Attorney Kate Canlis already had decided not to seek the death penalty in the case, so prosecutors quickly agreed.

"This was Dennis' decision," Gigarjian said. "It punished Dennis, and it protects the community."

McGuire said she believes a major reason Richesin pleaded guilty was the strength of the case against him, including his own confession.

Richesin knew the victims because the three had used methamphetamine together, according to investigators.

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Richesin

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Richesin's girlfriend testified at a grand jury hearing that she had told Richesin to stop spending time and doing drugs with the women.

Richesin apparently decided the only way to do that was to kill the girls, McGuire said.

McGuire said Richesin told detectives that he and Pereira were arguing in the moments before her death, and that when Pereira bent over to pick up some methamphetamine that had fallen on the floor, Richesin reached for a fire extinguisher and struck her with it repeatedly.

He buried the body near the school that night.

Reber was killed about eight months later. Richesin told detectives that Reber asked him for a ride, and that he agreed but said he needed to stop at the school first.

What happened there isn't clear, but Richesin told detectives he wrapped a rock in a newspaper, snuck up behind Reber and struck her.

Richesin told police Reber spoke to him after he first struck her, saying "Is that what this is all about?"

He said, "Sorry Kelly, I have to do this," he told investigators.

The case took an unexpected turn moments after the plea. After the families had left the courtroom, another defendant, 33-year-old Jon Stanley Sjobeck, who was awaiting his own court hearing, attacked Richesin.

Bailiff Tim Doyle said Sjobeck punched Richesin in the face about 15

times before Leeming subdued Sjobeck.

The courtroom was quickly cleared, and Sjobeck was led away while a bloody Richesin sat with a napkin pressed to his face. Leeming said Richesin suffered a bloody nose.

Leeming said he had no idea why Sjobeck attacked his client. Sjobeck was in court to deal with a stolen-car charge.

Detective Jim Aguirre, who investi-

gated Sjobeck's case, said he also could think of no link between the two.

Sjobeck swore at deputies after the attack and refused to talk, sheriff's spokesman Kim Allyn said. Sjobeck will be charged with battery.

Richesin will be formally sentenced to life without the possibility of parole on July 2.

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