

# Couple charged with murder

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## Pair allegedly beat, strangled homeless man at camp site

*murder*

By **JASON SCHULTZ**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

A Texas couple accused of murdering a homeless man were arraigned in a Santa Cruz court Tuesday.

Tia Lauren Hitt, 20, and James Landrum Jones, 22, both of Fort Worth, Texas, entered no plea to charges that they killed 52-year-old transient Michael Todd Blanton on Feb.

10 at a camp site commonly called "Camp Paradise" on the banks of the San Lorenzo River. Police found Blanton's body in some bushes Feb. 21.

Prosecutor Christine McGuire said Hitt and Jones used a bicycle chain to choke Blanton and then a 32-pound cinder block to beat him to death.

McGuire said investigators believe the couple may have killed Blanton, who had been staying in the Santa Cruz area, after they got into an argument because Blanton's campsite was too close to their campsite.

After the murder Jones and Hitt took \$1,300 in cash from Blanton's pockets, McGuire said, but she does not believe money was a motive for the murder. She said the couple did not know Blanton had money before they killed him. She said Blanton may have gotten the money from disability insurance payments because

he had lost his right hand. McGuire said she did not know when or how Blanton lost his hand.

McGuire said investigators know very little about the couple.

Hitt's father, Jerry Hitt, who said he is suffering from Parkinson's disease and unable to come to California to see his daughter in jail, said Hitt met Jones a few months ago.

Neither defendant entered pleas Tuesday because their court-appointed attorneys, Public Defender Jon Minsioff for Jones and Thomas Wallraff for Hitt, said they had not reviewed the case. Judge Art Danner raised the bail against Hitt, who was originally charged as an accessory but later charged with Blanton's murder, to \$1 million. Both remain in jail.

The couple will return to court Tuesday to enter pleas on the murder charges. Hitt also will enter a plea on an unrelated charge that she had sex with a 14-year-old boy in Santa Cruz on Feb. 20.

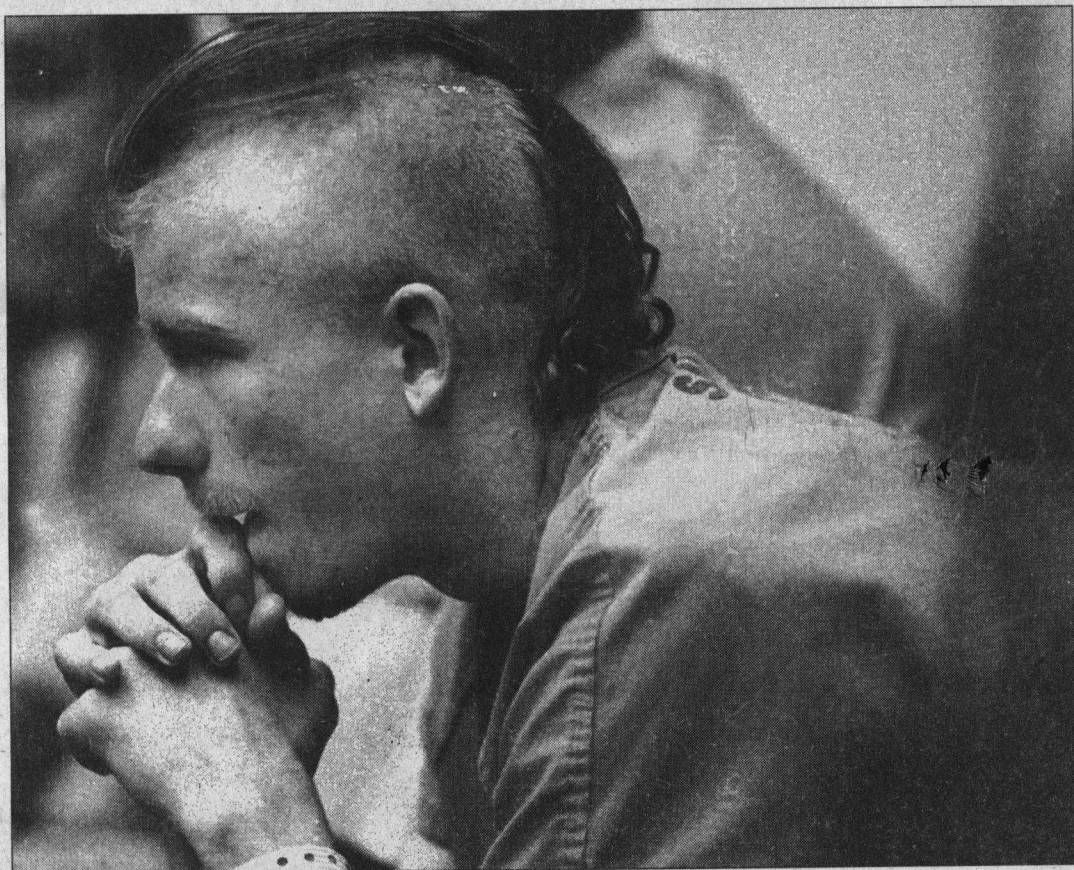
That case was what led police to Blanton's body, according to police Lt. Joe Haebe. Police picked up Hitt and Jones on Thursday to question them before they knew Blanton had been killed, Haebe said. Information detectives learned while they were interrogating the couple led them to believe there had been a murder, which led to Blanton's body.

Contact Jason Schultz at  
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**RIGHT:**  
James Jones  
listens in court  
Tuesday morning.

**TOP:**  
Tia Hitt  
in court  
on Tuesday.



Bill Lovejoy/  
Sentinel photos