

Pair ordered to stand trial in homeless man's killing

murder
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A judge ruled Friday that a homeless couple, accused of killing a homeless man in February, will face murder charges.

In a preliminary hearing, Santa Cruz police officers testified that the couple confessed to beating and strangling 52-year-old Michael Blanton on Feb. 10 and hid his body in bushes along the San Lorenzo River.

SANTA CRUZ James Landrum Jones, 22, and Tia Hitt, 20, both of Fort Worth, Texas, seemed distracted and at points amused as Sgt. Scott Campbell told how the couple used a stick, a bike chain and a rock in the brutal killing.

According to Campbell's testimony, Jones said he and Hitt were sleeping in their tent in the former homeless enclave Camp Paradise around 4:30 a.m. when Blanton wandered into their campsite. Jones told Blanton to leave. He did without resistance, but as he walked away, Hitt asked Jones if he was going to kill him, and Jones said, "Yes, I am."

Armed with sticks, Hitt and Jones knocked Blanton to the ground and repeatedly hit him in the head, Campbell testified.

Jones told police he used his hands and a bicycle chain to choke Blanton. And when that didn't work, Jones grabbed a 20-pound rock and smashed the victim's head.

Jones told Campbell that after the slaying they dumped Blanton's body in the bushes, threw the rock in the river and went to the nearby homeless shelter for breakfast.

After breakfast the couple rifled through Blanton's backpack, and found \$1,300. They spent it in a four-day shopping spree downtown.

Police said it appears the motive for the killing could have been the couple's desire to create their own human skull with a candle inside, similar to replicas they had seen downtown.

Campbell said there is no evidence that the couple knew that Blanton had money, nor do they believe the couple had been drinking or using drugs.

But the sergeant said that Hitt told them when she realized that Blanton's skull had been caved in, she said, "There goes my candleholder."

During the hearing Hitt and Jones were animated and looking at each other as Campbell testified about the slaying. Jones laughed at one point.

Hitt, who sports the word "EVIL" on her wrist, played with her hair, which was tied up in a number of colorful rubber bands.

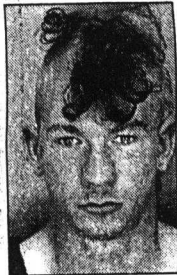
Campbell testified that Hitt also admitted having sex with a 14-year-old boy in the weeks after the slaying.

Johnson testified that according to the boy, he met Hitt and Jones on Pacific Avenue and went to their tent where he had sex with Hitt. The boy testified that he watched as Jones and Hitt had sex. And he said he and Jones took turns having sex with Hitt.

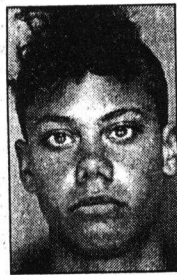
Judge Bill Kelsay ordered both to stand trial on the murder charges, and ordered Hitt to stand trial on the sexual allegation.

After the testimony, Kelsay said he had "a good deal more than a strong suspicion" that they committed the charged offenses. A trial date will be set on Dec. 4.

Both have been held in County Jail without bail since their arrest on Feb. 20.



JONES



HITT