

Transient guilty of first-degree murder

Victim strangled, bludgeoned to death with rock

By **CATHY REDFERN**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — A 23-year-old transient was convicted of first-degree murder Tuesday for beating a homeless man to death in a campsite near the San Lorenzo River in February 2002.

James Landrum Jones showed no emotion as Judge Michael Barton rendered his decision, while the brother and sister of victim Michael Todd Blanton hugged one another and wept.

Barton ruled immediately after lawyers made their closing arguments in a low-key murder trial that began Nov. 20.

Jones' girlfriend, Tia Hitt, 21, testified against Jones in exchange for a lighter sentence.

Jones waived his right to a jury trial after Barton ruled that his confessions could be admitted as evidence. Defense attorney Art Dudley had argued that police did an unacceptable job of reading him his Miranda rights before questioning. Dudley said he'll appeal the verdict.

Prosecutor Ariadne Symons argued in her closing that there was enough evidence to prove his guilt even without his confessions.

Blanton, 52, was a former UC Berkeley student who had lived in Santa Cruz for sever-

al years. Blanton, who was born without a right hand, was leaving the area where Jones was sleeping with his girlfriend, Tia Hitt, when the pair cornered him.

Jones told him, "You're not getting out of here alive," then beat, kicked and choked him. He delivered the fatal blows with a large rock, Symons said.

In their statements to police, Hitt estimated it took Jones 15 minutes to kill Blanton, while Jones said he thought it lasted 20 to 30 minutes. He told police the murder gave him "an adrenaline high," and that he would do it again, Symons said. Jones told police he was sorry, but hadn't lost any sleep over it, the prosecutor said.

Dudley contended that "the evidence points out that the real killer is Miss Hitt." He said Jones was taking the fall for her, and that she would do anything for her freedom.

Hitt described the rock used in the killing in detail, he said, and described Blanton's face turning "bluish" as he was strangled.

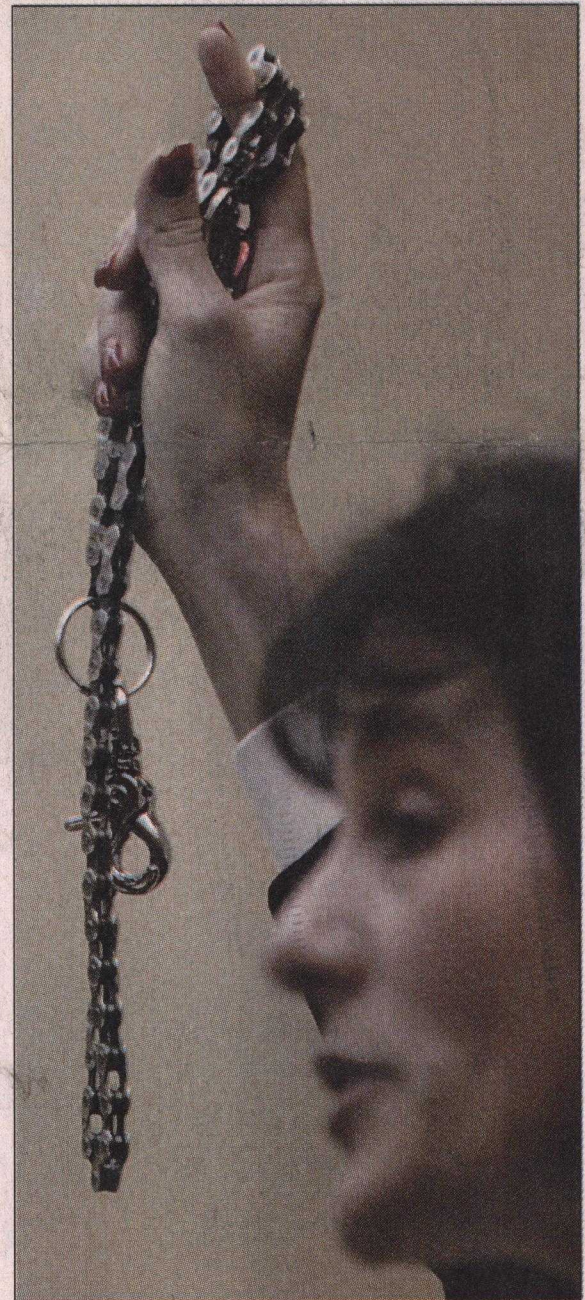
See **VERDICT** on **BACK PAGE**

TOP LEFT: Convicted murderer James Jones listens in court as the verdict is read Tuesday.

TOP RIGHT: Barbara Jackson, sister of the slain man, reacts as Jones is convicted of first-degree murder.

RIGHT: Prosecutor Ariadne Symons displays a replica of one of the weapons used on Blanton.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos



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He also said there was no evidence of premeditation.

Symons countered that other witnesses and evidence matched her story.

The case against Jones was strengthened by his confessions, and the deal Hitt cut with prosecutors to testify against him in exchange for pleading guilty to voluntary manslaughter and promises of a 24-year sentence.

Symons argued that the killing was premeditated, a necessity for first-degree murder. Jones had told Hitt he would kill to prove his love for her, Symons said, and told Hitt he would slit someone's throat to get her a skull to use as a candleholder after the couple saw a plastic one in a shop in Texas. That story that horrified even "hardened homicide investigators," she said.

Jones couldn't find his knife during the attack, she said.

He also wanted to prevent Blanton from reporting him to police, which the victim said he would do as he left the campsite, Symons said. Jones did not register as a sex offender in Texas, where he was imprisoned from age 13 to 20 for sexually abusing his 4-year-old stepbrother, Symons said.

Hitt led police to Blanton's hidden body after a 14-year-old runaway told police he had been sexually assaulted by Hitt and that the pair claimed to have killed someone. The couple had come to Santa Cruz from the Fort Worth area a few months before the killing.

Jones will be sentenced Jan. 9.

Symons plans to ask that Hitt be sentenced that afternoon.



Barbara Jackson, sister of murder victim Michael Blanton, gets a hug upon hearing James Jones' conviction Tuesday.

Bill Lovejoy/
Sentinel

Murdered man's family speaks of compassion

By **CATHY REDFERN**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Michael Todd Blanton had not spoken to his family for more than 10 years when they got the news he had been beaten to death near a campsite along the San Lorenzo River.

They have found peace, however, knowing Blanton had associated with people who treated him with compassion and respect during his 10 years in Santa Cruz.

"It was so good for us to be able to come here and see how Michael had found a community, a home," said his sister, Barbara Jackson of Arizona, a medical consultant for the Christian Broadcast Network. "It's been such an amazing comfort to us."

Blanton, 52, a graduate of Wilcox High School in Santa Clara, had a nervous breakdown at UC Berkeley in the 1970s, shortly before finishing his dissertation in philosophy, Jackson said.

A former water polo player, scuba diver and expert marksman, he struggled with mental

health problems since that time, she said, and became homeless within a year. His brother spoke to him weekly for years, but lost his trail in the late 1980s at a bus station in Baton Rouge.

Tuesday, Jackson and Jonathan Blanton, a Palo Alto physician, visited their brother's favorite spots, including Bookshop Santa Cruz and St. Francis Soup Kitchen. They spoke to Chris Nunez and the Rev. Mark Stetz, who organized a service for him at Holy Cross Church, as well as Santa Cruz police officer Eric Seeley, who had long conversations with Blanton.

Jackson called her brother bright, articulate and gentle.

"I'm so glad somebody was here for him," she said.

Jackson also praised the District Attorney's Office for its persistence in pursuing the murder case against the two people who killed him.

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