

OUR REGION

45-to-life term in murder of brother's killer

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Robert Grajeda Canchola Jr. paid for the prison-cell killing of his brother's murderer Friday with a sentence that will keep him in prison for 45 years to the rest of his life.

Canchola testified he didn't know that Julian Joseph Barajas Jr. shot and killed his brother outside a party in the Los Angeles suburb of Montebello 18 years ago. The sentencing judge called the assertion "remarkable" for its "creativity and lack of attachment to the truth."

Sacramento Superior Court



Bryan Patrick Bee file, 2010

Robert Grajeda Canchola Jr. claimed self defense at his trial.

Judge Michael A. Savage also said Canchola was "shameless" in telling jurors he killed Barajas because the victim

tried to kill him first once they were in the cell together.

"Only in the theater and the parallel universe we call a jury trial can a person brazenly swear to such outlandish falsehoods and not simultaneously wink at the jurors," Savage said. "I'd call the defendant's entire tale a whopper, but that would be an insult to whoppers."

Savage sentenced Canchola to 15-to-life for his Sept. 16 second-degree murder conviction. He tacked on another 25-to-life under the state's three-strikes sentencing law and five more for another prior on Canchola's record.

The judge said the jury gave Canchola "an unwarranted break" by finding him only guilty of second-degree murder for the Sept. 20, 2004, killing of Barajas. The murder was "truly and obviously ... planned, premeditated and deliberate," Savage said.

Canchola, 39, had been serving time for robbery and an assault on a prison officer when he wound up at California State Prison, Sacramento. The same time he was there, Barajas, who had been convicted in the 1993 murder of Antonio Canchola, 19, the defendant's brother, was transferred to

the Folsom prison.

Prison authorities testified that Canchola then manipulated prison officials to get into the same cell as Barajas.

In sentencing Canchola, the judge also took a poke at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation for allowing the two prisoners to be housed in the same cell.

"That the Department of Corrections would allow Mr. Barajas placed at the same prison, let alone to be housed in the same cell with (Canchola), is, at a minimum, outrageously negligent and per-

haps much worse," Savage said. "The individuals who allowed this to happen are clearly culpable because they set the table for a murder."

Corrections officials maintained that it was a coincidence that Canchola and Barajas wound up in the same prison.

Canchola, they said, worked the political structure of the inmate world on his own to gain access to Barajas. No prison employees were ever disciplined in the case.

Call The Bee's Andy Furillo, (916) 321-1141. Follow him on Twitter @andyfurillo.

SACRAMENTO

Two taxis carjacked in two days, police say

Police are seeking a suspect in a taxi carjacking early Saturday, the second attack on a cab-driver in two days.

In the latest incident, a driver picked up a fare at Fifth and J streets about 1 a.m. and headed for Fifth and Broadway.

The driver attempted to get the passenger to leave the taxi at a gas station.

The man responded by striking the driver.

Both men got out of the cab, and the passenger hit the driver again and took the taxi.

Inmate's death should prompt review of jail

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CRIME REPORTS

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FOLSOM

Inmate found dead; cellmate suspected

The death of an inmate at California State Prison, Sacramento, early Saturday is being investigated as a homicide.

Anthony Steadham, 38, was discovered in his cell at 3:10 a.m. in the prison's maximum-security housing unit. He was trans-

ported to an outside hospital, where he was pronounced dead at 5:04 a.m. California Department



Anthony Steadham

of Corrections officials said in a statement that Steadham's cellmate, inmate Maurice Woodson, 43, has been identified as the suspect.

The incident came just three days after a riot at the prison, also known as New Folsom. The riot involved 150 inmates and left 11 injured.

Steadham was serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole for first-degree murder. He was admitted to the prison in 1997 from San Mateo County. Woodson came to the prison in April from San Bernardino County. He is serving a 46-year sentence for attempted second-degree murder.

Visitation at the prison has not been affected by the incident.

— Matt Weiser

POLICY ON CELLMATES MAKES LITTLE SENSE

Why would Sacramento County jail deputies place a mentally ill suspect with an apparent animus toward Mexicans in a cell with an illegal immigrant from Mexico?

That's the obvious question raised by the murder of Evaristo Ramirez, the 25-year-old day laborer killed in his Sacramento jail cell two years ago. Richard Harden, Ramirez's cellmate, is charged with the killing.

As The Sacramento Bee's Andy Furillo reported, Harden had been released from a 72-hour mental health hold the day he was arrested and jailed for allegedly attacking a Mexican American woman with a hammer at a local Home Depot store. Security guards who intervened in the attack said at the time that Harden asked them to release him, complaining, "They come over the border and take all our jobs."

Given that history, why was Harden placed in a cell with Ramirez? Facing a civil lawsuit, Sacramento Sheriff's Department officials have so far refused to divulge full details of their handling of Harden after he was taken into custody, but they did talk to The Bee's editorial board about the handling of jail inmates in general.

People taken into custody are screened first by nurses for health and mental health problems. Those who are seriously mentally ill are segregated from the general population, housed in single cells, primarily in the jail's 18-bed psychiatric unit. Jail officials rely mainly on what inmates tell them about their mental health conditions — responses to questions like: "Have you seen a psychiatrist lately?"

Incredibly, jail officials do not

track whether someone in their custody has ever been placed on a mental health hold. Sheriff's Lt. Phil Brelje, the assistant commander at the main jail, told The Bee, "We don't have access to records of 72-hour mental health holds." So it is conceivable no one at the jail knew Harden had been released from a Yolo County mental health facility the day he was arrested.

Jail officials also separate people who express any kind of racial animus. An inmate who expressed hatred for blacks or Mexicans or whites would be segregated from the general population. However, while jail deputies may know what a person in custody is charged with, Brelje says they don't know the details of a person's arrest record. Thus jail deputies would not necessarily know that Harden had expressed hostility toward Mexican Americans the day he was arrested.

Finally, jail officials say seriousness of charge is not a consideration in how those arrested are housed in Sacramento's main jail. Thus Harden, who was charged with attacking a woman with a hammer, could easily be housed with a drunk driving suspect like Ramirez. That seems dangerous. In fact, the state guidelines outlining minimum standards for local detention facilities specifically state that "seriousness of crime charged," is one of several categories that ought to be weighed in assigning inmates to housing units.

Ultimately a civil lawsuit will determine whether Sacramento jail officials did all they should have done to protect Evaristo Ramirez. But the sheriff does not have to wait for a lawsuit to examine this incident and make the changes necessary to better protect inmates in the future.