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PRESS RELEASE

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NORTENO GANG MEMBER SENTENCED IN HOMICIDE OF SALINAS MAN MISSING SINCE DECEMBER OF 2015

People v. Tai Cruz; SS170083A

SALINAS, California- Monterey County District Attorney Jeannine M. Pacioni announced today that 26-year-old Tai Agoun Cruz, a known member of the Salinas East Market subset of the Norteno criminal street gang, was sentenced to 35 years in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation by Judge Andrew G. Liu.

Cruz pled guilty on February 20, 2019, to one count of voluntary manslaughter with gang and personal use of a firearm enhancements.

Paulino Guzman, III of Salinas was 18-years-old when his family reported him missing in January of 2016. The Salinas Police Department received information the same month that Mr. Guzman had been killed in December of 2015, by Tai Cruz. The Salinas Police Department's Investigations Bureau then worked tirelessly to solve the case: interviewing multiple witnesses, serving numerous search warrants, analyzing social media and other digital evidence, and following up on several tips and leads.

Eventually, Salinas police detectives were able to determine that on the night of December 12, 2015, Paulino Guzman III was attending a party at an apartment on North Main Street in Salinas. Tai Cruz and many other people affiliated with the Norteno criminal street gang were also in attendance. At some point during this party some attendees were cleaning their firearms. The victim was holding a firearm as if to inspect it; it was not pointed at anyone nor was his finger on the trigger. Cruz took the gun from the victim's hands, pointed it at the victim's head from about three feet away, placed his finger on the trigger and shot Mr. Guzman once. According to a witness, Mr. Guzman sustained one gunshot wound to the cheek and almost immediately had stopped breathing.

Everyone at the party fled the scene. Mr. Guzman's best friend dialed 911 and made an anonymous report of gunshots in that apartment.

The next day Cruz and multiple other individuals returned to the apartment, placed Mr. Guzman's body into a large plastic tub and cleaned up the scene. This included tearing up carpet in the area

Mr. Guzman was shot. Cruz, another male, and a female drove away from the apartment with Mr. Guzman's body in a small green car which has never been located.

The landlord at the apartment complex entered the apartment sometime after this and found the carpet removed, bottles of cleaning solution, and bags of torn carpet. After learning of the homicide within the apartment, Salinas Police Department's Crime Scene Investigators located a large amount of blood under the floorboards. Blood samples were taken from family members of Paulino Guzman III and it was determined to be Paulino Guzman III's blood.

The victim's step-mother tearfully addressed Cruz during the sentencing hearing. She looked right at him and pleaded with him to tell the family where the victim's body is, so he can be put to rest. She told Cruz about how she first held the victim when he was two months old and that despite being his step-mother, he called her mom by the time he was five. She stressed that while the victim may have made poor choices, he has a family who loves him, misses him, and who wants closure. Judge Andrew Liu encouraged Cruz to do the right thing for the grieving family, to which he responded, "no comment."

If anyone has information that would help law enforcement locate the body of Paulino Guzman III, please contact District Attorney Investigator John Coletti at (831) 759-6774; the Salinas Police Department Investigations Bureau at (831) 758-7226; or the Salinas Police Department's anonymous tip line at (831) 775-4222.