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Court binds Juan Mendez over for first-degree murder of DeAngelo Smith and attempted murder of second victim

Following a preliminary hearing, Superior Court Judge Carol Ash ruled today that sufficient evidence exists to bind 19 year old Juan Manuel Mendez of Merced over for trial in the murder of DeAngelo Smith, 17, a Golden Valley High School student and athlete. Additionally, Judge Ash found sufficient evidence that Mendez participated in the attempted murder of 17 year-old confidential victim "JS." She further found that Mendez committed the crime for the benefit of the Norteno street gang, and that he was vicariously armed with a deadly weapon. Mendez now faces multiple life sentences if convicted at trial.

Evidence introduced at the preliminary hearing established that Mendez drove the getaway vehicle and three unknown assailants to the Sunnyside Apartments in Merced, where the May 14th shootings took place. The three unknown assailants found the two victims sitting on a park bench at the apartments and opened fire killing Smith and wounding JS.

After the shooting, Mendez drove the assailants away from the crime scene and hid their weapons under his bedroom mattress. Mendez told the police he did not know the three shooters, but that drove them to the Sunnyside Apartments because they had called him on the phone and requested he drive them there. Mendez claimed he then hid the weapons at the request of the people he did not know.

"This was a totally senseless crime because the two victims were innocent bystanders who simply made the mistake of sitting on a park bench at night where gang members prowl," Deputy District Attorney David Sandhaus, the prosecutor in the case said

"The victims in this case could have been anyone's child in Merced County; one can only imagine the grief of their parents. The only way we can stop the evil plague of gang crime is for concerned citizens who know facts about gang crimes to come forward to protect innocent children who are being murdered," Sandhaus added.

Anyone with information regarding this crime should contact Merced Police Detective Christopher Russell at 209-564-2526.