

Berkeley High Grad Held In '06 Stabbing Death

Kristin Bender, Oakland Tribune, 2/26/2009

BERKELEY -- For three years, Juan and Barbara Ramos kept giant photos of their slain son in the window of their home at Masonic and Portland streets in Albany.

The pictures and message about his slaying were meant to keep Juan Carlos Ramos' memory alive to the thousands of motorists and pedestrians who passed by daily. It was also meant to keep the crime in the public's consciousness, in hopes that someone would finally relinquish information that would help Berkeley police solve the case.

Recently, someone finally gave police the information they needed to make an arrest.

Three years after the 18-year-old Ramos -- a Contra Costa College student and graduate of El Cerrito High School -- was stabbed to death at an unsupervised house party in the Berkeley hills, police have arrested a Berkeley High School graduate, now 19, who has been charged with the killing, a police spokeswoman said Wednesday.

The Alameda County District Attorney's Office this week charged Justin Michael Johnson with one count of murder for Ramos' death and three counts of assault with a deadly weapon for the nonfatal stabbing of three teens, said police Sgt. Mary Kusmiss.

Johnson was arrested in South Carolina and is awaiting extradition to Alameda County, Kusmiss said. Police will not immediately release a photo of the suspect or discuss the circumstances surrounding his arrest until after

detectives in Berkeley get an opportunity to interview him, Kusmiss said.

Detectives stayed on the case, checking back with reticent party witnesses until they finally yielded solid information, she said.

"Although the witnesses were still resistant, detectives were able to gain enough cooperation, which led to Johnson's arrest," Kusmiss said. "Witnesses said (Johnson) was involved in an argument prior to the stabbing."

At the time of Ramos' death, police said the fight may have been sparked by an argument over a skateboard. Ramos may have been fatally wounded after trying to help a friend who had already been stabbed, she said.

Ramos' parents were notified Tuesday about the arrest. On Wednesday they said they were still in shock.

"We want to see justice for our son," Barbara Ramos said. "We have been waiting for three years for justice." She said she kept her son's photo in her window so people going by would not forget what happened.

"I always felt that it was important to keep his name in the news and in people's hearts and minds," she said.

On Feb. 10, the third anniversary of their son's death, the couple put up a new sign that read "Juan Carlos Ramos -- murdered at a house party in Berkeley on Feb. 10, 2006. If you have tip, call mom at 510-478-6500."

Barbara said she will keep the sign in the window to continue to honor her son.

The Ramoses are also involved in civil litigation against Keith Oppelt, the owner of the house at the time. The party was hosted by an Albany High School senior whose parents were out of town.

"We are extremely pleased that the police have been able to move forward on this case and we are looking forward to seeing justice done," said Berkeley attorney Robert Cheasty, who is representing the parents in the civil case.

The death was atypical for Berkeley, where most killings happen on the streets and are typically linked to gangs, drugs or both, police said.

Ramos was fatally stabbed in front of dozens of teens from Berkeley, Albany and El Cerrito who were attending the beer bash in the 700 block of Contra Costa Avenue. As Ramos' blood soaked his T-shirt and then the asphalt -- as friends tried to get him to the Albany police station -- the teens looked on in shock, then ran from the party and left in their cars, police said at the time of the killing.

Three other boys were stabbed that February night, but all survived.

Ramos and two of the stabbing victims were taken by friends to the Albany police station on San Pablo Avenue, about a mile from the party.

Ramos later was declared dead of stab wounds at the trauma center at Highland Hospital in Oakland.

Berkeley police at the time questioned at least 50 teens who attended the party but no one gave them the information they needed to solve the case.

The no-snitch code that permeates urban culture stymied the case for years, police said. Kusmiss said detectives interviewed witnesses again after they graduated from high school and were removed from possible peer pressure to stay quiet.

During several memorials, Juan Carlos was remembered for loving to show off his red Camaro, riding horses and flashing a big smile.

"He was a very popular boy at school -- handsome, willing to help people," his mother said. "He would shake your hand when he met you and, if you needed him to, he would open the door for you. He was just a wonderful young man."

Juan Carlos, who was living with his parents in El Cerrito at the time of his death, graduated from El Cerrito High six months early. His parents collected his diploma posthumously in 2007. He was attending classes at Contra Costa College in Pinole in hopes of becoming an electrician, his parents said.