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PRESS RELEASE

7-6-2022

Rio Dell Homicide Team Honored with Proclamation

On Tuesday, July 5th 2022 Rio Dell Mayor Debra Garnes presented a Proclamation honoring the investigation and prosecution team involved in the homicide of Johnny Mack Renfro. Renfro, a Texas native and Humboldt County resident was the victim of a drive by shooting in Rio Dell on the evening of Friday, August 29, 2019. The Proclamation marks the conclusion of months of intensive investigative work and years in the Superior Court system including a trial and subsequent appeals.

The honored include Rio Dell Chief of Police Jeff Conner, Sergeant John Beauchaine and Deputy District Attorney Carolyn Schaffer.

“Homicides are very rare in Rio Dell.” Stated Rio Dell Mayor Debra Garnes. “This team, led by Chief Conner, pursued the case very effectively, quickly identifying the suspect and tracking him across California and eventually all the way to North Dakota to bring justice. They have made Rio Dell very proud.”

Once the suspect was apprehended and returned to Humboldt County the pandemic added new challenges and delays to the Court proceedings, which were ultimately telecast on the internet. Referring to Deputy District Attorney Carolyn Schaffer, Rio Dell City Manager Kyle Knopp stated, “I don’t think we could have asked for a better prosecutor, Schaffer had the case tightly nailed down despite the circumstances with the pandemic.”

“In addition to these three exceptional individuals, I think it’s important to note that within seconds of the shooting, concerned neighbors came out to render aide to the victim, at potentially great personal risk to themselves. The entire block was out in force providing information to the Police Department. This includes camera footage and important eyewitness accounts.” Knopp concluded by saying, “The cooperation was phenomenal and I think this was key to the outcome of the court case.”

Attached:

- Press Release
- Scan of Proclamation
- Copy of Spring 2021 Rio Dell City Newsletter article “The Murder of Johnny Renfro” authored by Chief Conner.
- Photos ///







PROCLAMATION

OF THE CITY OF RIO DELL ACKNOWLEDGING AND THANKING

JEFFREY CONNER, JOHN BEAUCHAINE & CAROLYN SCHAFER

FOR THE INVESTIGATION & PROSECUTION OF THE MURDER OF JOHNNY MACK RENFRO

WHEREAS, on August 29, 2019, at around 6:30pm a cruel and heinous act was committed in the City of Rio Dell when a young man was shot and killed in a drive by shooting on Monument Road; and,

WHEREAS, the victim of this crime, Johnny Mack Renfro, was a resident of Humboldt County who came to Rio Dell unarmed, without marijuana or other narcotics, without an unusual amount of money in his wallet and with no apparent intent to cause harm or otherwise break the law in our city; and,

WHEREAS, this homicide shocked the entire community; and,

WHEREAS, in responding to this act, the Rio Dell Police Department arrived on scene within minutes of the shooting and activated the Humboldt County Major Crimes Task Force, enlisting the aid of the Humboldt County District Attorney's Office, Humboldt County Sheriff's Office, Arcata Police Department, Eureka Police Department, Ferndale Police Department, Fortuna Police Department and the California Highway Patrol; and,

WHEREAS, in conducting the homicide investigation over the following fourteen months Chief of Police Jeffrey Conner and Sergeant John Beauchaine of the Rio Dell Police Department acted with exemplary professionalism, extreme urgency and great skill to collect evidence, identify and track a suspect and travel across the country to interview and remand said suspect to the Humboldt County Jail; and

WHEREAS, Deputy District Attorney Carolyn Schaffer undertook the People's case with calm resoluteness, care for the victim and great skill in the face of an aggressive defense intent on discrediting the Rio Dell Police Department and vilifying Mr. Renfro; and

WHEREAS, the pursuit of justice in this case involved witnesses stepping forward, the assistance of many allied agencies and a jury of members of the community all under the leadership and guidance of three important individuals, Jeffrey Conner, John Beauchaine and Carolyn Schaffer.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT PROCLAIMED on this 5th day of July, 2022 by the City Council of the City of Rio Dell that we do hereby express our heartfelt thanks and pride on behalf of the residents and businesses of Rio Dell for the work of CHIEF OF POLICE JEFFREY CONNER, SERGEANT JOHN BEAUCHAINE AND DEPUTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY CAROLYN SCHAFER in the successful pursuit of justice.



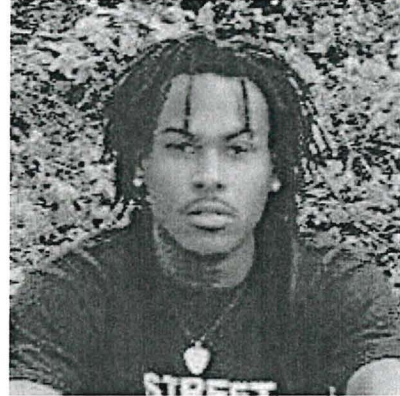
IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have
hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of
the City of Rio Dell to be affixed this fifth
day of July, 2022.


DEBRA L. GARNES, MAYOR

The Murder of Johnny Renfro

Article by Chief of Police Jeff Conner

On August 29, 2019, at about 6:30 in the evening, Johnny Renfro was changing his clothes behind his car, which was parked in front of 70 Monument Road. A green Honda Accord passed his location without him seeming to notice. About a minute and a half later, the same car returned. This time, shots were fired from the Honda, one of which struck Renfro in the abdomen. Another hit the rear window of the car, causing it to shatter. The green Honda fled north through town. Renfro hobbled down the driveway before collapsing to the ground. Numerous people called 911. Police and fire personnel rushed to the site. Renfro, however, had been mortally wounded and was pronounced dead at the hospital.



Chief Conner requested the assistance of the Humboldt County Major Crimes Task Force due to the small size of the department and also that the victim was unknown to the department. Investigators from the Eureka, Arcata, and Fortuna Police Departments, the Humboldt County Sheriff's Department, the District Attorney's Office, and the California Highway Patrol congregated in Rio Dell to assist in the initial phase of the investigation. This included canvassing the neighborhood for witnesses and surveillance systems.

Fortunately, these events were recorded by a surveillance camera. This video gave a good description of the car used in the drive-by shooting. This information was released to the press and calls were soon coming into the police department about its possible location. One of these calls was accurate and the car was located on a remote property off of Highway 36. A check of the vehicle showed that it had been stopped by an Arcata Police Officer in May. At that time, it was occupied by Demetrius Coleman and Alma Ahumada-Mendoza. Sergeant Beauchaine spoke with the McEnery Family, which owned the remote property and learned that Coleman had dropped the car off at a different property in Alton within an hour of the shooting. Jovan Ignjatovic and Regina Osenbaugh identified Coleman as the man who had been driving the car when he left it at their property. He claimed to have been robbed and shot at, hence the broken rear window. Coleman was picked up by Ahumada-Mendoza in a second vehicle and they left.

The video was not clear enough to identify Coleman as the driver of the car at the time of the shooting, however, he matched the general description. The registered owner of the car was contacted. She was Coleman's ex-wife and provided Sergeant Beauchaine with Coleman's phone number. A search warrant was written for the records related to this phone number. We learned that the phone had travelled from Eureka to Rio Dell and was in this area at the time of the shooting. Just after the shooting, the phone travelled north and was in an area consistent with the Highway 36 corridor for several hours. This phone had contacted another phone nine times in the thirty minutes before and after the shooting. A second search warrant was written for the records associated with this number. This led us to a new witness who was key to proving the case, Mariah Acosta.

Acosta and her young son had been in a second car with Ahumada-Mendoza. This vehicle, a gray Jeep, followed Coleman, who in turn, was following Renfro south from Eureka to Rio Dell at high speed. It is

unknown if Renfro knew that he was being chased. Ahumada-Mendoza did not have her phone with her, so she used Acosta's phone to communicate with Coleman. The gray jeep then parked on Wildwood at Monument. Acosta stated that she saw Ahumada-Mendoza take something from under the hood and then walk west on Monument. Acosta then saw Coleman who was looking for Ahumada-Mendoza. He also headed west on Monument. When Ahumada-Mendoza returned a short time later to the parked Jeep, she no longer had the item. As soon as Ahumada-Mendoza got back in the car, Acosta heard gunshots. Ahumada-Mendoza then drove rapidly into Scotia before heading north on US 101. Acosta was able to convince Ahumada-Mendoza to drop her and her son off at Murrish Market in Hydesville.

In November of 2019, the investigating officers contacted Ahumada-Mendoza on a traffic stop in Eureka. She admitted to giving Coleman an item, but claimed it was marijuana rather than a gun. She claimed that she had opened the hood because the car was overheating. Based on this information, warrants for the arrest of both suspects in the case were sought and approved by the Humboldt County Superior Court.

In December, the investigators learned that Coleman and Ahumada-Mendoza had been in Idaho with Coleman's sister who lives in North Dakota. Shortly, thereafter, another phone number was acquired that was associated with Ahumada-Mendoza. Additional search warrants were obtained for phone records and location data. This allowed the investigators to confirm that Ahumada-Mendoza's phone had been in both Fargo and New Rockford, North Dakota just prior to Christmas. This information was passed to law enforcement in both communities.

On January 26, 2020, Coleman was apprehended in New Rockford, North Dakota by the Eddy County Sheriff's Department. On January 28, 2020, Ahumada Mendoza was arrested by a US Marshal Task Force in Fargo, North Dakota. The department interviewed both suspects and assisted in transporting them back to Humboldt County. In addition, Ahumada-Mendoza had three phones in her possession when she was arrested. The department wrote a search warrant to seize these phones for forensic examination.

"The motive for the shooting is still not certain. Johnny Renfro came to Rio Dell without any money, guns, or drugs."

The motive for the shooting is still not certain. Johnny Renfro came to Rio Dell without any money, guns, or drugs. It is believed that he was on his way to see a girlfriend. Evidence on Coleman's phone suggests that he believed Renfro and/or his associates had stolen between twenty and fifty pounds of marijuana from him in Eureka. However, Coleman did not identify Renfro as one of the men who robbed him, either during his interview or at trial.



At the suspects' preliminary hearing, Judge Canning bound Coleman over for trial, but declared that there was insufficient probable cause to try Ahumada-Mendoza. Coleman's trial was held in October and November of 2020 before Judge Kelly Neel. Numerous witnesses testified for the prosecution in addition to those previously mentioned. These included three persons who had seen Coleman's car in Rio Dell including one woman who was able to identify Coleman as he passed her car while fleeing the scene. Other witnesses included law enforcement officers, evidence technicians, an expert in using phone data to establish the location of a phone, a police dispatcher, and the pathologist who performed the

autopsy. Coleman testified on his own behalf. He admitted that he had, in fact, been in the green Honda when the shots were fired, but claimed that he was hunkered down behind the driver in the rear seat. He only knew the driver by his moniker, Dread.

The jury deliberated for several days, but found Coleman guilty of first-degree murder including the special allegation of firing from a motor vehicle. Coleman has appealed this conviction, claiming that his counsel was ineffective. He is still incarcerated in the Humboldt County Correctional Facility until the local appeal can be completed. Unless his appeal is granted, he will be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.



Mayor Debra Garnes receives a briefing from Sgt. John Beauchaine on the apprehension of suspect Coleman near Fargo, North Dakota. January 27, 2020

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