

330 West Broadway  
San Diego, CA 92101  
(619) 531-4040  
SanDiegoDA.com



RACHEL SOLOV  
ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY

OFFICE OF THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY  
DISTRICT ATTORNEY

SUMMER STEPHAN  
District Attorney

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Contact: [Tanya Sierra](tel:6195313315) (619) 531-3315  
*En Español* [Barbara Medina](tel:6195313305) (619) 531-3305

# Man Sentenced for Brutal 2023 Murder and Series of Violent Crimes in El Cajon

*Jury Convicted Defendant of Murder, Firearm Assaults and Other Felonies*

San Diego County District Attorney [Summer Stephan](#) announced today that Kenneth McNally Jr., 42, has been sentenced following his conviction for the murder of 59-year-old Samuel Holthaus (pictured below) and a series of additional violent crimes committed in Harbison Canyon in 2023. A jury found McNally guilty on all counts, including first-degree murder, two counts of assault with a semi-automatic firearm, shooting at an inhabited occupied structure/vehicle, and assault by means likely to produce great bodily injury. He was sentenced today to 216 years to life in prison.

McNally is a third-strike offender with a lengthy and violent criminal history. At the time of the murder, he was on probation for his second-strike offense after being convicted of attacking a dog with an axe. McNally was also on Post Release Community Supervision (PRCS) for two additional criminal cases; one involving assault and the other resisting an officer with force. His first strike conviction stemmed from a 2004 case, in which he was convicted of assault on a peace officer.



Photo of Victim: Samuel Holthaus, 59.

**“This was an extraordinarily violent and disturbing case involving a defendant who terrorized multiple victims before committing a cold-blooded murder and attempting to conceal the crime,”** DA Stephan said. **“Because of the courageous witnesses who came forward and the relentless work of law enforcement and prosecution team led by Deputy DA Javier Vargas, this dangerous defendant is being held fully accountable for his heinous crimes.”**

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**[\[VIDEO: Victim Impact Statements from Samuel Holtaus' sisters at the sentencing hearing.\]](#)**

The charges stem from events that occurred on September 3, 2023, on a six-acre property in Harbison Canyon, which is an unincorporated area of El Cajon, where McNally had been intermittently staying with acquaintances in a trailer alongside several other residents. Earlier that day, the San Diego County Sheriff's Office received calls from residents reporting that McNally was aggressively demanding rides off the property while appearing to conceal a weapon beneath a jacket. One witness later told investigators that during a drive near Sloan Canyon Road off Dehesa Road, McNally confessed that he had killed Holthaus and dragged him down a hill with a noose around his neck. A second witness also revealed McNally made a similar confession to her earlier that day. She also reported seeing McNally driving the victim's truck erratically before parking it near the grave.

A few hours later, Holthaus' body was discovered buried in a shallow grave after a witness noticed the top of the victim's head protruding from the ground. Investigators found an extension cord wrapped around the victim's neck and observed a gunshot wound to the side of his face. Holthaus' truck was parked next to the grave with blood covering the driver's side doorframe. Detectives also located drag marks in the dirt leading away from the vehicle to another area of the property where they discovered coagulated blood and a pile of burned trash.

Over a year-and-a-half after the discovery of Holthaus's body, a third witness came forward stating he saw McNally shoot Holthaus. According to the witness, McNally then tied one end of an electrical cord around Holthaus's neck and attached the other end to Holthaus's truck. McNally drove the truck 329 feet to the location where the body was ultimately found, dragging Holthaus's body by his neck.

A search of the trailer where McNally had been staying revealed an empty gun case bearing the serial number of a small semi-automatic handgun. The trailer owner confirmed the gun case belonged to McNally. Multiple witnesses told investigators they had previously seen McNally carrying a small black handgun on the property, and one witness reported seeing him fire the weapon multiple times. The murder weapon itself, however, was never recovered.

On September 6, 2023, the Sheriff's Fugitive Task Force located McNally at a motel in El Cajon. Investigators detained a van McNally was riding in and discovered a bag containing bloody clothing. Preliminary DNA analysis showed the majority of the blood on the pants tested positive for McNally's DNA; only a single blood stain found on one of the pant legs belonged to Holthaus.

In addition to the murder conviction, prosecutors presented evidence of several other violent incidents involving McNally on the property in the weeks leading up to the killing. Hours before Holthaus' murder, McNally accused residents of stealing his backpack and held a handgun to the neck of victim Maurizio Cairo while threatening him. Approximately two weeks before the murder, McNally fired at least five rounds into a van being driven by victim Michael Medland after a confrontation on the property. Detectives later recovered the bullet-riddled van and the fired rounds during the homicide investigation. Jurors also heard evidence that in July 2023, McNally strangled former roommate Gary Cash inside a trailer on the property while making

nonsensical statements. Another resident intervened and stopped the attack.

The case was prosecuted by **Deputy District Attorney Javier Vargas**.

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*About the San Diego County District Attorney's Office*

*The San Diego County DA's Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.*

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