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NEWS RELEASE

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Man Sentenced to Prison for Murder-for-Hire Cold Case

A San Bernardino County man was sentenced yesterday to 28 years to life in state prison for the 1992 fatal shooting of a young mother during a staged robbery, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office announced.

Deputy District Attorney Robert Villa said jurors convicted Leon Martinez of Yucaipa in March 2015 of the first-degree murder of Vicki Ghonim, 17, in case VA116931.

The victim was in a car with her infant son and husband at Creek Park in La Mirada when an unknown person walked up to their vehicle, attempted to rob them and then fatally shot her.

The case remained unsolved for almost two decades until a DNA hit in 2009 linked Martinez to the killing and lead to his arrest. The defendant was further implicated in the killing by an ex-girlfriend with whom he had shared details about the murder-for-hire plot.

Evangelina Martinez, the defendant's wife, was charged in the same case with one count of dissuading a witness for attempting to discourage the former girlfriend from testifying about the admission.

The female defendant was sentenced to three years of summary probation after pleading open to the court in February 2014. In an open plea, the defendant pleads to the court without negotiating a settlement with the District Attorney's Office.

Evidence presented during Leon Martinez's trial revealed that the victim's husband, Morrad Ghonim, 44, paid the defendant \$500 to stage a robbery and carry out the murder.

Ghonim ultimately was charged and convicted of the first-degree murder of his wife. Jurors also found true special circumstance allegations of lying in wait and murder for financial gain. In April 2015, Ghonim was sentenced to life in state prison without the possibility of parole.

The case was investigated by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Homicide Bureau.

About the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office

Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey leads the largest local prosecutorial office in the nation. Her staff of nearly 1,000 attorneys, 300 investigators and 800 support staff members is dedicated to protecting our community through the fair and ethical pursuit of justice and the safeguarding of crime victims' rights.