



News from the Office of the District Attorney

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DERRICK JOHNSON CONVICTED OF FIRST DEGREE MURDER FOR JANUARY 2007 FATAL CASTLE WEST APARTMENTS FIRE

Today, an El Paso County jury convicted Derrick Johnson of all counts related to the January 16, 2007 fatal fire at the Castle West Apartments in Colorado Springs. He faces a minimum of life in prison, without the possibility of parole, when he is sentenced by District Court Judge Jann DuBois on January 30, 2009. The charges included two counts of 1st Degree Felony Murder and 1st Degree Extreme Indifference Murder, Arson Attempted Extreme Indifference Murder, Attempted Murder and Menacing, for setting a fire that caused the deaths of residents Joe Santoyo and Clemente Perez-Salgado and endangered the lives of hundreds of displaced Castle West residents.

The trial commenced on October 16th with prosecutors Margaret Vellar and Donna Billek presenting the testimony of over two-hundred witnesses and admitting over a thousand pieces of evidence. The evidence proved that on January 15th and 16th, defendant Derrick Johnson made numerous calls and sent text messages to his former girlfriend, Najua Bell-Jackson who was staying at the Castle West Apartments. The defendant threatened to kill Ms. Bell-Jackson and made further threats to “blow up” the apartments. That same night, Derrick Johnson was captured on a 7-11 surveillance video borrowing a gas can and filling it with gas. Fire Investigators with the Western National Response Team with Alcohol Tobacco & Firearms (ATF), Colorado Bureau of Investigations (CBI), and Colorado Springs Fire Department (CSFD), determined that the fatal fire was intentionally set outside of Apartment B-19, the same apartment where Ms. Bell-Jackson was staying.

Following the jury’s verdict, Senior Deputy District Attorneys Margaret Vellar and Donna Billek expressed gratitude for the jury’s patience and attentiveness throughout the trial. Ms. Billek added that “the verdict brings justice for the families of Joe Santoyo and Clemente Perez-Salgado as well as for the hundreds of residents impacted by this horrific inferno started by Derrick Johnson.” District Attorney John Newsome acknowledged that “this verdict would not have been possible without the prodigious, two-year long, team effort of the Colorado Springs Police Department Investigations Division, Colorado Springs Fire Department, ATF, CBI and the dedicated attorneys, investigators, paralegals and support staff of the District Attorney’s Office.”