

# Killer in Outlook murders given more prison time

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YAKIMA, Wash. — A convicted murderer seeking to have an 80-year sentence reduced for his role in the killing of an Outlook family in 1993 was instead given more prison time by a Yakima County Superior Court judge Tuesday.

In arriving at his decision, Superior Court Judge Douglas Federspiel said the slayings were not the impulsive actions of an immature 14-year-old — Joel Ramos' age at the time — but were “clear, cold (and) calculating.”

Ramos, 34, is currently serving four consecutive 20-year terms for his role in the bludgeoning and stabbing deaths of Michael and Lynn Skelton, both 34, and their sons Jason, 12, and Bryan, 6. Ramos and co-defendant Miguel Gaitan were both 14 at the time.

The judge said he was especially troubled by the murder of the 6-year-old boy, who was bludgeoned with a piece of stovewood to eliminate witnesses to the murders of his parents and brother.

Federspiel called Bryan Skelton's murder an execution. Instead of reducing Ramos' 80-year sentence to 26 years and eight months as suggested by the prisoner's attorney, he increased it to 85 years.

"In weighing these actions, I believe they were monstrous," the judge said, adding, "The punishment is just. It protects the public."

The slayings sent shock waves through the Yakima Valley for the savagery and fears it was a gang initiation.

Gaitan, acknowledged by authorities as the instigator of the crime, was convicted of aggravated first-degree murder at trial and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Ramos pleaded guilty to three counts of felony first-degree murder — similar in effect to an accessory charge — for the murders of Michael, Lynn and Jason Skelton.

He also pleaded guilty to one count of first-degree murder for the slaying of Bryan Skelton, admitting he helped kill the boy, who was caught hiding under the covers of his bed. In exchange, Ramos was sentenced to four consecutive 20-year terms.

Now 34, Ramos got a new day in court due to a technical glitch in his probation — which wasn't set to take effect until 2061 — that opened the door to a full-blown resentencing following changes in state and federal law.

First, the Washington Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that judges have the discretion to impose concurrent sentences in cases like the Ramos case. Then, last year, the U.S. Supreme Court banned mandatory life sentences for juveniles convicted of murder.

That decision was in line with a series of Supreme Court rulings based on developing brain science that has drawn an increasingly bright line between juveniles and adults. For example, in 2005, the high court banned execution of anyone for crimes committed while younger than 18.

During a **hearing Monday** in Federspiel's courtroom, an attorney for Ramos portrayed her client as a model prisoner who avoids gangs and has an exemplary history of employment and education behind bars.

The defense also presented expert testimony on advances in brain research that has solidified the understanding of adolescent brain development, now thought not to be complete until about the age of 25.

Ramos, meanwhile, pronounced himself a different person than he was at 14, and wept as he apologized for the slayings.

“Words cannot express how remorseful or shameful I feel,” he added, crying as he acknowledged that what he did “I can never take it back.”

Federspiel said he accepted that changes in the law at the state and federal level allowed him to resentence Ramos.

But that discretion cut both ways, so long as the court’s findings were carefully laid out for the record

In reaching his decision, Federspiel did in fact make a record as he recited several facts about the killings that he found troublesome.

First, he said, the way Ramos blocked the back door of the Skelton’s home while Gaitan entered from the front suggested they knew the family was home and didn’t want them to escape. Both boys were wearing gloves and had armed themselves with knives.

The judge said Ramos had several chances to intervene as Gaitan first took out Michael Skelton, the father, who was partly disabled from an industrial accident, then bludgeoned and stabbed Lynn Skelton in the shower.

Ramos was there but didn’t intervene as 12-year-old Jason Skelton, a classmate at Granger Middle School, begged Gaitan to leave his mother alone before he too was slain.

And by his own version of events, Ramos then participated in the heartless killing of 6-year-old Bryar Skelton, ostensibly so there would be no witnesses.

Finally, Federspiel said, Ramos helped Gaitan try to steal property from the Skelton home — they left items in the family’s car because neither teen knew how to drive a manual transmission — and then buried his blood-soaked clothes at a dumpsite on the Yakama reservation.

Taken as a whole, the judge said, the killings “were not indicative of impulsive acts. These acts were planned.”

Earlier in the day, Ramos’ lawyer, Stacy Kinzer of Seattle, had asked the judge to run the three felony murder sentences of 20 years concurrently to each other and concurrently to the first-degree murder count for the killing of Bryan Skelton.

Kinzer suggested the judge increase the count for killing Bryan Skelton to the top of the sentencing range, 320 months. That would have made for a full sentence of 26 years and eight months.

Deputy prosecutor Ken Ramm asked the court to reaffirm the original sentence: four consecutive 20-year terms, for a total of 80 years.

Federspiel responded by running the three felony murder sentences consecutive to each other, for a total of 60 years.

But his decision to increase the count for Bryan Skelton's murder to 25 years, then run it consecutive to the other counts for a total of 85 years, appeared to stun the defendant and members of his family.

They left the courtroom afterward without speaking to the news media. Kinzer declined comment except to say the sentence "wasn't ideal."

Ramm was slightly less reticent.

"Put that under the heading, 'Be careful what you wish for,'" he said as he strode out of the courtroom.

Federspiel's ruling could be construed as a warning to Gaitan, who is eligible to appeal his life-without-parole sentence due to the Supreme Court's ruling last year in *Miller v. Alabama*.

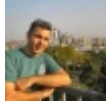
That decision banned mandatory life sentences for juveniles, but did not automatically commute life sentences. Instead, the ruling means only that inmates will have the opportunity to seek reductions.

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## 25 comments



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[Comment](#)**Andrew Bush** · Top Commenter

The murders of the parents and brother were heinous enough. Then they found that 6 year old boy hiding under his covers. So sad. That poor child. so frightened and no one could help him.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 14 minutes ago**Brenda Hubert**

I taught Jason, Miguel, and Joel. The two murders came to school the next day and watched their classmates and staff suffer through this loss! They put the family and others through hell. Way to go Judge!! Joel and Miguel need to stay where they belong, jail!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 32 minutes ago**Bob Larson** · Top Commenter · Technology Training Consultant at Lighthouse Consulting

Good looking young man, probably truly remorseful and probably turned his life around, maybe would make a good father and a support to his parents if they are still around. BUT, he blew it all with some horrifically bad decisions in 1993 and now he must come to terms with the fact that the life he has now is all he is going to have. It is a sad waste of a life, but crimes like this demand no less. The judge did the right thing. Hopefully, it will be an object lesson to other young fools.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · about an hour ago**Linda Murray** · Top Commenter

Bet he wishes he had just did his time and hadn't whined. Kudos to he judge, he made a good solid decision.

[Reply](#) · [1](#) · [Like](#) · about an hour ago**Ronald Crawford**

...and now you know what's behind door number two!!!

[Reply](#) · [2](#) · [Like](#) · 2 hours ago**Tracy Schroder**

Judge Douglas Federspiel is a HERO in my book. Every court in this country needs at least 1 just like him Run for any office and you have my vote!

[Reply](#) · [2](#) · [Like](#) · 2 hours ago**Todd Havner** · Yakima, Washington

Once in a while it all comes together in the right way.

[Reply](#) · [2](#) · [Like](#) · 4 hours ago**Marty Sable** · Top Commenter · Old but Active at United States Army Retired

Thank God, I have been losing faith is Our justice system. This gives me a little hope.

[Reply](#) · [2](#) · [Like](#) · 4 hours ago**Stephen Ruth** · Truck Driver at Werner Enterprises

Our justice system is not about rite, wrong, guilty, or not guilty. What ever side spent the most money on a case will win 98% of the time regardless of rite, wrong, guilty or not.

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