



**KEVIN BARTON**  
**WASHINGTON COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY**

---

150 North First Avenue, Suite 300, MS 40, Hillsboro, Oregon 97124-3002  
(503) 846-8671 / (503) 846-3407 (fax)  
[www.WashingtonCountyDA.org](http://www.WashingtonCountyDA.org)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAY 25, 2021

CONTACT: STEPHEN MAYER  
[stephen\\_mayer@co.washington.or.us](mailto:stephen_mayer@co.washington.or.us)  
971-708-8219

**RAFAEL MORA-CONTRERAS SENTENCED IN 2001 MURDER CASE**

HILLSBORO, Ore.- Gonzalo Pizano-Guzman, age 21, disappeared on the evening of July 6, 2001. As his family searched for him, authorities first discovered his car burned south of Cornelius, and then his body on the side of a gravel road near Henry Hagg Lake. He had been shot and stabbed by unknown assailants. The WCSO began an extensive investigation into Gonzalo's murder, culminating in the arrest of Joseph Noble and Rafael Mora-Contreras about two months later. Investigators learned that Mora-Contreras had likely killed Gonzalo to prevent his upcoming marriage to Marisol Mora, Rafael Mora-Contreras' sister. Noble, a criminal associate of Mora-Contreras, had joined in kidnapping and then killing Gonzalo at the behest of Mora-Contreras.

The joint trial of Mora-Contreras and Noble in 2003 remains one of the lengthiest and most complex in Washington County history. During the trial, many individuals testified, some cooperatively and others less so. Both defendants took the witness stand and proclaimed their own innocence while blaming the other for Gonzalo's murder. The jury convicted both men of murder and each received a life sentence. Specifically, Mora-Contreras was convicted of Aggravated Murder based on the theory that he had paid Joseph Noble to carry out the crime.

Both convictions were affirmed by the Oregon Court of Appeals. In 2008 Mora-Contreras filed a petition for Post-Conviction Relief (PCR) in Marion County Circuit Court (case No. 08C25103), alleging that the performance of his original defense attorneys and his appellate attorneys was defective in various ways. Per standard practice, attorneys from the Oregon Department of Justice (DOJ) represented the State in the PCR litigation, and the Washington County DA's Office (WCDA) was not a party or directly involved in any way.

Remarkably, the PCR litigation took nine years from beginning to end. In November 2017, retired Marion County Judge James Rhoades issued an opinion granting post-conviction relief to Mora-Contreras and sending his case back for a new trial. Judge Rhoades ruled that Mora-Contreras's defense attorney should have objected to the requirement that he wear a leg restraint and/or a stun belt (fully concealed anti-escape devices) during the trial. The WCDA's Office was surprised and disappointed by this ruling and requested that DOJ appeal Judge Rhoades' decision. DOJ declined to appeal, and Mora-Contreras was then returned from state prison to the Washington County Jail to await his new trial.

The new trial process has taken several years to progress to this point due in part to delays associated with the pandemic and in part to challenges associated with retrying a case nearly two

decades later. New defense attorneys were appointed to represent Mora-Contreras, and new prosecutors were assigned (one of the original prosecutors is now a judge and the other has retired). Additionally, many aspects of the case against Mora-Contreras have changed in the over seventeen years since the original trial. Some witnesses have died, others have become uncooperative, and significant evidence is no longer available to the State. Furthermore, the legislature has since amended the Oregon murder statutes in ways that benefit criminal defendants. Given the changed dynamics, the WCDA in 2021 agreed to participate in a settlement conference with Judge Eric Bergstrom, a veteran judge of dozens of murder cases. Judge Bergstrom brokered and ratified the resolution of this case.

Today, Rafael Mora-Contreras pleaded guilty to Manslaughter in the First Degree and Kidnapping in the Second Degree and was sentenced to 25 years and 10 months in prison.

From 2018 until as recently as last week, the WCDA has been in periodic and detailed communication with the family of Gonzalo Pizano-Guzman. This has included consultation with an experienced victim advocate and direct meetings with the assigned prosecutors. Through our meetings we have found the Pizano family to be an extremely loving and dedicated group. They are justifiably passionate about seeking justice for their son and brother's murder. To that end, they have clearly expressed that, if at all possible, Rafael Mora-Contreras should be re-sentenced to the same life term originally imposed. Prosecutors have explained the difficult aspects of the case to the Pizano family, but they remain steadfast in their belief that Mora-Contreras should receive a life sentence. The WCDA's Office agrees that Mora-Contreras deserves to spend his life in prison for the murder of Gonzalo Pizano-Guzman. However, we must also weigh the strength of the evidence in a case in 2021, the likelihood of conviction, the changes to Oregon's murder laws that have a retroactive impact on this case, and the likely sentence when deciding whether to agree to a resolution. It is the professional assessment of experienced prosecutors that this plea agreement is indeed the appropriate resolution to this case. We applaud the passion of the victim's family, and regret that they are unhappy with the result.

The co-defendant, Joseph Noble, did not file a PCR claim and remains incarcerated with the Oregon Department of Corrections. He will be eligible for a parole hearing in 2031.