

# Gang killings intertwined: Robert Luecke, Janessa Ramirez and Brian Winston

By Pablo Lopez

In the early evening of Jan. 3, Brian Winston was shot and killed in central Fresno.

Winston was a family man who worked in construction, took his kids to the fair and out to eat, and bought gifts for them on their birthdays, said his longtime girlfriend, Chantelle Montgomery.

His violent death, deemed gang-related by police even though there's no hint that Winston was active in gangs, barely raised a ripple in a city that's seen its share of gang violence.

But in an odd twist, the killing of Brian Winston ties together two times when a community grieves for an innocent victim swept up in that gang violence.

This month, Fresno is mourning the death of 9-year-old Janessa Ramirez, struck by an errant bullet that police say was fired in a gang shooting.

Twenty-three years ago, the Valley mourned the senseless killing of 23-year-old Robert Luecke III outside Fashion Fair. Three teenage members of a ruthless southwest Fresno gang were convicted in the case. Two are serving life sentences without the possibility of parole. The third was Brian Winston.

## When a community grieves

Police Chief Jerry Dyer said there are certain types of killings that “shock the conscience of a community resulting in public outcry for justice” — the murder of a police officer, an elderly person or a child.

He also said the public demands swift justice when a murder occurs in a location considered “sacred” by the community such as a place where children can go without supervision.

Back when Luecke was killed, Fashion Fair was such as place, the chief said.

“Yes, there was widespread public outcry during the Luecke murder,” Dyer said, “but not to the degree we see in the Janessa Ramirez case. The Luecke murder created widespread fear whereas the murder of Janessa has created communitywide pain and anger.”

Dyer concluded: “All life has value, but the life of a child is precious.”

## Regrets, and forgiveness

Montgomery said Winston regretted his part in Luecke's murder.

“He would have nightmares about it and wake up in cold sweats,” said Montgomery, who met Winston in 2002 and is the mother of two of his children. Winston has another child from a previous relationship and helped Montgomery raise two of her children from another relationship.

“He felt bad about what happened,” said Montgomery, 39. “But you know how it is, that gang influence makes you do things you don't want to do.”

But before his death at age 37, Winston had left the gang, was going to Fresno City College and had a steady job, Montgomery said.

He got a second chance, she said, because Luecke's mother had forgiven him.

In a telephone interview Friday, Judy Luecke said: "I guess I did."

She said she had come to the realization that Winston was just a kid back then, sitting in the back seat of a stolen car, when her son was shot. "I guess he was too young to say something," she said.

#### Death at the mall

Police said Winston was 14 and hanging out with Athain Russell and Deandre Moore, both 16. Police say they were members of the Villa Posse, a violent street gang that still operates today.

On Dec. 3, 1991, they had gone to the mall to steal a car.

After stealing a Mazda, they circled through a parking lot until spotting Luecke, his younger sister and his fiancée just north of Macys department store. Luecke, a Fresno State student from Lindsay, was shot after handing his wallet to Russell, police said.

After an intense manhunt, police arrested the suspects two weeks after the shooting. Russell later confessed to shooting Luecke and Moore confessed to being the getaway driver. Because of the heinousness of the crime, Russell and Moore were tried as adults. The case was so notorious that it was moved out of Fresno County.

In August 1993, Russell and Moore were convicted in San Mateo County Superior Court of first-degree murder during a robbery.

Because Winston's role was deemed minor, he was tried as a juvenile and admitted to committing manslaughter. He was sentenced to the California Youth Authority in May 1992. Authorities say he was paroled five years later.

#### Life of petty crime

Once freed, Winston split his time between his mother's home and at Montgomery's home. Over the years, he worked at several jobs and attended City College, Montgomery said.

He also flirted with trouble, according to Fresno County Superior Court records.

In May 2001, police pulled over the 24-year-old Winston at Florence and Clara avenues near Bigby Villa, an southwest Fresno apartment complex that gives rise to the Villa Posse gang's name.

Leaving the keys in the ignition and the car running, he and passenger David Flowers ran from police. After a brief chase, police arrested Winston and Flowers for giving a false identification to a police officer, driving without a license and possession of a hypodermic needle, court documents say.

Winston told police he lied about his name because he didn't have a driver's license. He said the needle belonged to his diabetic brother.

In January 2003, the misdemeanor case was dismissed.

Two months later, Winston was arrested on a felony charge of cocaine possession. At the time he was a passenger in a car driven by Abraham Haddisu, a Fresno man with a long rap sheet, the documents say.

A criminal complaint charged the 22-year-old Haddisu with evading police, drunken driving and hit and run causing property damage. Haddisu later pleaded no contest and was sentenced to two years in prison.

Winston was able to avoid prison. He struck a plea deal that combined his March 2003 arrest for cocaine possession

with another drug case in January 2004 that accused him and two others of possession of a handgun while selling cocaine.

To resolve the two cases, Winston pleaded no contest to drug possession and was sentenced to probation and a drug treatment program, the documents say. His codefendants — Flowers and Tina Renee Morgan, who also goes by Poe — were sentenced to short prison terms.

#### Turning his life around

Montgomery said she liked Winston because he had a positive outlook on life, a huge smile, and was good to his kids and her kids. They had their first child together in 2004, and since then, Winston's only offenses were reckless driving in 2008 and driving with a suspended license last year, court records show.

"We had our fights because I told him, 'I don't play west side,'" she said. "But I also gave him his freedom because I knew he had been cooped up in CYA."

Montgomery, who grew up in gangland in southwest Fresno, said the criminal lifestyle has destroyed many young men: "No matter how far you get, the gang pulls you back. You can't escape."

She said Winston's mother was instrumental in helping her son settle into life after his time in CYA.

And seven years ago, Montgomery said, Winston started to reflect on his life when his older brother was killed in a drive-by.

Police say Scott Winston, 31, was shot near Poppy and Grove avenues in southwest Fresno in June 2007. The case remains unsolved.

At City College, Winston took courses in African American studies. "I think it changed his mind about gangs," said Montgomery, who pointed out that Winston disliked guns, didn't own one, and wanted his kids to have a better life than his.

On Dec. 28, Winston arrived at Montgomery's home with a big cake and gifts for their son, Zy'ion, who turned 3 years old. "He liked being a father to his children, probably because he never had one," she said.

By the end of the week, Winston was dead.

Police say a gunman shot Winston in the chest shortly after 6 p.m. Jan. 3 at an apartment complex at Belmont and Park avenues in central Fresno. Police have described the killing as gang-related and believe Winston was visiting a friend when he was shot. The case remains unsolved.

#### Living with anger

For years, Luecke said she lived with anger toward Winston, Russell and Moore. "It was so senseless and cruel," she said, pointing out that her son was shot in front of his then-13-year-old sister, Kristle.

Judy Luecke recalled going to all of the court hearings and to Russell's and Moore's trial. She said Russell always appeared clueless, while Moore would stare at Kristle. "It was an evil stare," she said. "I will never forget his green eyes."

Luecke said she had to petition the court to attend Winston's confidential juvenile proceedings. What struck her was that Winston never had family at the hearings, she said. During the hearings, Luecke said she learned that Winston sat in the back seat of the stolen car and "watched everything go down."

Luecke said she also attended Winston's parole hearing at the CYA. She recalled being angry because they were going to let him out. But then something happened that she will never forget.

“We were in the same room with him and he looked at me and Kristle. He had tears in his eyes. He told us, ‘I’m sorry for my part in your son’s death. I had no idea what was going to happen.’ ”

Luecke recalled that Winston was crying and she didn’t know how to respond. But Kristle did. She hugged Winston. Seeing her daughter, Luecke said she hugged him, too. “He was just a kid. He probably didn’t know. I felt he was sincere in his apology.”

At that point, Luecke said she quit blaming Winston, and she began thinking about forgiving him.

“He looked liked a lost, little boy,” Luecke remembered.

After her son was murdered, Luecke advocated for stiff prison sentences for juveniles. But she said she also realized that many juvenile criminals are the product of poor parenting and absent fathers.

She recalled asking Winston if he would join her when she talks with other troubled youths. “He said he would, but never got in touch with me,” she said, noting that she lost touch of him because of laws that protect juveniles; she was never given Winston’s address or phone number once he left the CYA.

Memories flooded back when she and her husband, Robert, learned on the evening news about the shooting death of Brian Winston. She said they did the math and realized it was the same kid who was involved in their son’s murder.

In the telephone interview, Luecke seemed pleased to know that Winston was trying to be a good father.

She also said she had finally forgiven him.

“As a mother, you love kids. And when they make mistakes, you have to forgive them. That’s what mothers do.”

Contact Pablo Lopez: [plopez@fresnobee.com](mailto:plopez@fresnobee.com), (559) 441-6434 or [@beecourts](https://twitter.com/beecourts) on Twitter.

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