

Mom's forgiveness helps police find suspects in fatal shooting of 9-year-old Janessa Ramirez

By Jim Guy

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Brian Cooks, 22, left, and Isaac Stafford, 19, have been arrested in the shooting death of 9-year-old Vanessa Ramirez, Fresno police announced Friday, Jan. 30. FRESNO POLICE DEPARTMENT

- Timeline

Jan. 18: At 8:40 p.m., two gang rivals see each other on Marks Avenue near the Clinton Avenue intersection. Shots are fired; one bullet strikes 9-year-old Janessa Ramirez in the stomach. She later dies at Community Regional Medical Center.

Jan. 24: A memorial for Janessa at Cornerstone Church in downtown Fresno draws 500 people.

Jan. 28: Reward for tips leading to arrest of suspects is raised to \$25,000. That same day, Fresno police find suspect Brian Cooks during a traffic stop and arrest him for a parole violation.

Jan. 29: Suspect Isaac Stafford is arrested in Gilroy and returned to Fresno County.

Jan. 30: Fresno police bring murder allegations against Cooks and Stafford and announce their arrests. The suspects are in custody at Fresno County Jail in lieu of posting \$1 million each in bail.

Stacey Gonzales, whose daughter, Janessa Ramirez, was killed by a stray bullet fired in a gang shootout, said

Friday she forgives the men responsible for the 9-year-old's death and hopes "they can find peace in their hearts."

Janessa was killed Jan. 18 when she and her mother were chatting with friends in front of a laundromat at Marks and Clinton avenues in Fresno west of Highway 99. They had no way of knowing that two gang members — identified by police as Brian Lorrice Cooks, 22, and Isaac Kordell Stafford, 19 — were intent on settling an old feud with guns as they confronted each other nearly 300 yards away.

Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer called a news conference Friday to announce the arrest of Cooks and Stafford on murder charges, and Devonta Murphy, 22, on other charges connected to the case. The arrests capped a nearly two-week, 1,600-hour effort by the department to solve the crime. The investigation involved 40 detectives, U.S. Marshals and other agencies. Police offered a \$25,000 reward in the case and received 44 tips; 10 proved useful, police said.

But in the end, the compassion shown by Janessa's mother played the key part in getting a break, Dyer said.

"When our detectives told Brian Cooks, 'Janessa's mother has forgiven you,' he broke," Dyer said. "And then he began to tell the truth (about firing the fatal shot). Forgiveness is powerful."

Added Gonzales: "I forgive them, and I love them, and I hope they find the Lord ... Because now I have my full peace My baby is in a better place."

The shooting was the latest fatal incident involving gangs and guns in Fresno, something that the chief said is a deadly problem that police cannot solve alone. He cited his often-repeated message that it is a community problem that needs community involvement to end.

It also did not come as much of a surprise that it was a previous gun crime, one in 2012, that led to the Jan. 18 confrontation. That incident took place when an associate of Cooks, identified as Deondre Robinson, was sent to prison for a shooting nearby at Ashlan Avenue and Parkway Drive. Police say Stafford was a witness who helped send Robinson away, and Stafford's name was posted on social media as a snitch.

Stafford is known in the Valley athletic community as Isaac Sears, a starter on last year's Washington Union High School Central Section boys basketball championship team.

In explaining the shooting that killed Janessa, Dyer gave this account:

At 8:40 p.m. on Jan. 18, police say Cooks, armed with a handgun, was riding a skateboard north on Marks when he crossed paths with Stafford and possibly another person, who were southbound on the street in a Dodge Challenger. An exchange of gunfire erupted. Four rounds from the Challenger hit another car that Cooks crouched behind. Cooks fired one round before his gun jammed. That bullet flew 270 yards and hit Janessa in the stomach. She died a short time later at Community Regional Medical Center.

Stafford fled west on Clinton and Cooks ran through a nearby apartment complex. After the intense investigation, Cooks, who had tried to disguise himself, was arrested Wednesday during a traffic stop on a parole violation. Stafford was arrested in Gilroy on Thursday. Both were charged with the murder early Friday.

Murphy, who police say was in possession of the weapon they believe fired the fatal bullet when he was arrested Wednesday, was charged with a parole violation and for being a felon in possession of a firearm. Police say Stafford admitted being in the Dodge during the gunfight.

Also in attendance at Friday's news conference was Mayor Ashley Swearingin, who praised Gonzales as an example of compassion and forgiveness: "We must remember this family and do everything in our power to support them."

Gonzales closed her remarks by saying:

“Think of Janessa. She wouldn’t want people fighting and being mean to each other.

“Learn to forgive, but don’t forget Janessa.”

Court records

- **Brian Lorrice Cooks** lives at 3593 W. Dayton Ave., a neighborhood near Shields and Valentine avenues — just northeast of Clinton and Marks avenues, where Janessa Ramirez was shot.

He has a criminal record in Fresno County Superior Court.

In August 2013, he was sentenced to 16 months in prison after pleading no contest to possession of a sawed-off shotgun.

His record also includes a no-contest plea in June 2013 to attempted residential burglary and possession of a concealed weapon.

In September 2012, he was charged with felony corporal injury to his spouse or cohabitant, false imprisonment with violence and disobeying a court order. Those charges were dismissed in light of his previous no-contest plea in the attempted burglary and gun case, court records say.

In addition, he was charged in November with robbery, battery, child endangerment and disobeying a court order, but those charged were dismissed when the witness failed to appear in court, the records say.

- **Isaac Kordell Stafford**, the other suspect arrested in the case, does not have any convictions, according to Superior Court records.

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