

# Three acquitted in connection with Banning deaths

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Three defendants charged with murder in connection with a 2006 double-fatal shooting outside a Banning apartment complex have been acquitted of all charges by two separate juries.

The verdicts for two of the defendants, Robert McMorris, 19, of Banning, and Curlee Mitchell, 26, of Cathedral City, were read today, prompting family members and supporters of both men to raise their hands and quietly sob as they hugged in the crowded courtroom.

Mitchell, dressed in a dark suit, hugged his attorney for several minutes, then turned and smiled at his supporters. Sporting a yellow dress shirt, McMorris sat with his head down sobbing after the verdicts were announced.

Moments later, Judge Patrick Magers announced that a second jury had found Banning resident Julian McKee, 33, not guilty on all charges. McKee's verdicts were reached Wednesday, but Magers had ruled they be sealed and placed a gag order on all parties involved to prevent the outcome from influencing the other jury.

The men were acquitted of murder and gang allegations.

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The Press-Enterprise  
Julian McKee, left, Curlee Mitchell and  
Robert McMorris, right.

It was the first of many trials expected over the year in the case that stems from the February 2006 shootout that left Beaumont resident Vincent McCarthy, 33, and La Quinta resident Demetrius Hunt, 18, dead. Thirteen people have been charged with murder in connection with the killings.

In terms of the number of defendants, it is the largest murder case in Riverside County history.

McKee had been charged with the special allegation of multiple murders -- meaning if convicted, he could have been sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Prosecutors are using the long-standing legal theory of aiding and abetting -- a concept that holds all participants of a crime responsible for the "natural and probable consequences" of their actions -- to seek murder convictions against those who they believe are members of gangs who were present when the men were shot to death during an altercation.

--Jose Arballo Jr.

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