

# 10 years later



Heidi Childs and David Metzler are buried side by side in Virginia Memorial Park in Bedford County along Forest Road (U.S. 221). (Below) The couple share a photo together while at the beach. Photos courtesy VSP

## Investigation continues into murders

By **TOM WILMOTH**

Editor

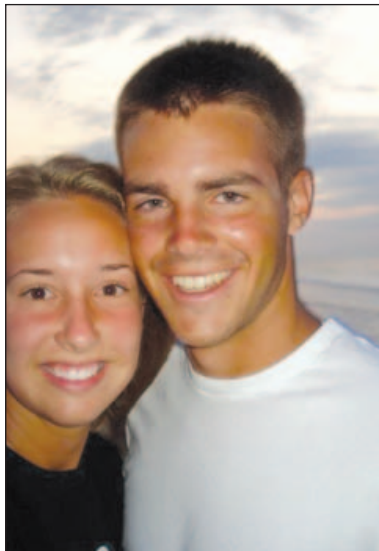
news@bedfordbulletin.com

Ten years ago Heidi Childs and David Metzler visited Caldwell Fields in Montgomery County.

Both were just weeks into their sophomore year at Virginia Tech when they headed there in David's 1992 Toyota Camry that Wednesday night in 2009. They hadn't planned on staying long.

But sometime between 8:25 and 10 p.m. the two Tech students were brutally murdered.

August 26 marked the 10-year mark since those murders occurred and law enforcement announced Friday the investigation was being



ramped up, including offering a \$100,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the individual or individuals responsible for the murders.

### Ten years ago

August 26, 2009 was a Wednesday and it was shortly after 8 p.m. when Heidi, 18, and David, 19, arrived at the isolated parking lot off Craig Creek Road in the Jefferson National Forest in Montgomery County. They met before college through their church youth group. David had brought along his guitar; he wanted to share

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# Investigation:

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some new songs with Heidi.

But when the couple was found shot the next day, it was still in the car. Heidi's purse, credit cards, VT ID and lanyard, camera and cell phone were gone. They have never been found.

The bodies of the two students were discovered in that parking lot early the next morning by a man walking his dogs.

Heidi and David were both accomplished athletes, played guitar and sang, and came from close-knit families from Campbell and Bedford counties. Neither family - nor the investigators assigned to this case - has given up hope that these murders will be solved.

On Friday, local, state and federal law enforcement officials provided an investigative overview and update on the active investigation; and both families were there to share remarks, as well.

Investigators are hopeful that a new website and the \$100,000 reward will generate renewed interest and additional information related to the 2009 murders.

Both families joined the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office, Blacksburg Police Department, Christiansburg Police Department, Virginia Tech Police Department, Montgomery County Commonwealth's Attorney, Virginia State Police, FBI, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Marshals Service and U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Virginia for Friday's press conference.

## Asking for help

The speakers focused on asking for those with information on the murders to come forward.

"We have specific individuals we are interested in and pursuing related to this case," said Lt. Colonel Tim Lyon, director of the Virginia State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation. "We have an extensive inventory of evidence collected from the scene and from vehicles seized during the course of the investigation. We have DNA, and are working to take advantage of 10 years-worth of technological and scientific advancements in DNA testing and criminal databases. We have new leads still coming in that we are pursuing. But we still need the public's help to fit all of these pieces and parts together to bring justice to Heidi, David and their families."

Those interested in learning more about Metzler, Childs and the investigation are encouraged to go to the new website established for this case at <https://vspunsolved.com/>. This will be a site with continually evolving content. The Website features photos, a video tribute, and more information about this case. There is a section dedicated to receiving online tips from the public and tipsters can remain anonymous if they choose. Tips can also be

received by phone at 540-375-9589.

"It's been 10 years. It's time to come forward and let these families find some sense of peace. Heidi's parents and siblings, David's parents and siblings, their friends have all been held hostage long enough. Now's the chance to share whatever details, suspicions, odd behavior, and/or information anyone has in connection with these unsolved murders," continued Lyon.

Investigators were quick to point out that this is not a cold case. Though no arrests have been made, it doesn't mean progress isn't taking place, noted Lyon.

"We have specific individuals we are interested in," Lyon said. "We have new leads coming in that we're pursuing. We still need the public's help. We know there are people, who know exactly what happened. We need to hear from you."

He added that there are others who might not know what happened but suspect they know someone who does.

"Reach out to us and share with us what you know, what you may have noticed, what you may suspect," Lyon said. "Someone out there knows what happened. It's time for somebody to come forward, to get it off their chest, to get it off their conscience."

He said the families of the two teens have been held hostage long enough. "I ask you to reach out to us. Let us know, what you know."

## The families speak

Don and Laura Childs thanked law enforcement for their efforts over the past 10 years. Heidi's parents noted that they had given their daughter the nickname "Smiley" because she always had a smile on her face.

They said she was never demanding on them as parents, noting Heidi "usually just smiled and said, 'I'm fine'."

They noted Heidi's

Christian faith and her desire to grow in that relationship with Christ.

A bio-chemistry major, Heidi had planned to go into the medical field. "She never got to finish college or fulfill her dream," they stated. "Someone knows who (did this) and what happened; someone can bring this to a close," they said in closing.

David was Susan and Keith Metzler's only son. Over the past decade, they said they have missed out on seeing their son's dreams fulfilled as well.

"Our family will never be whole," they said. "We will ever know what it's like to have a son take a bride. We will never see our son be a dad."

The Metzlers said the story is not over. "There is someone out there who has something to add to this story. God knows who you are," they said.

They said a cold-hearted, merciless murderer is walking around right now. They said those who know what happened need to decide if they want to side with such an individual or stand up for what is right.

"They have chosen by their silence to cast their vote with the murderer. But it's not too late. Break the silence and make it right. Do this before this person devastates another family."

## The reward

Thanks to the support of the community, Virginia Tech and, most recently, the FBI, the reward being offered for any information that leads to an arrest(s) in the murders of Metzler and Childs is now up to \$100,000.

"The FBI is committed to devoting investigative resources to this investigation," said Special Agent in Charge David W. Archey, FBI Richmond Field Office. "Today we augment those efforts by contributing \$28,000 towards the reward, increasing the total to \$100,000; hoping it will generate additional valuable information for investiga-

SEEKING INFORMATION RELATED TO THE MURDERS OF VIRGINIA TECH STUDENTS HEIDI CHILDS & DAVID METZLER



Tips that lead to an arrest could earn you a

# \$100,000

## REWARD

Heidi & David were shot and killed sometime between 8:25 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. on Aug. 26, 2009 in the parking lot of Caldwell Fields.

Their killer(s) is still on the loose.

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Have information you'd like to share?  
Go to [www.vspunsolved.com](http://www.vspunsolved.com) or call 540-375-9589



# SOERING, HAYSOM PAROLED

But after lengthy investigation, Soering's claims of innocence found to be 'without merit'

By **TOM WILMOTH**

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Thirty-four years after committing what might have been the most horrific murders Bedford County has suffered, the two defendants found guilty of those murders have been paroled.

Last week, the Virginia Parole Board released Jens Soering and Elizabeth Haysom from prison to be deported to their respective countries. Soering has been released to ICE deportation detainers to

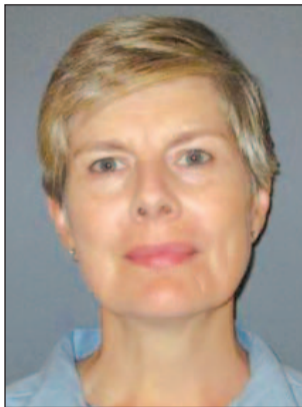
return to Germany and Haysom to Canada.

But their release did not include an exoneration for Soering of the crimes, something he has been seeking since being convicted in 1990.

According to a statement from Adrienne L. Bennett, chair of the Virginia Parole Board, the Parole Board made an unfavorable recommendation to Virginia Governor Ralph Northam for Soering's request for an absolute pardon.



Jens Soering



Elizabeth Haysom

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See **PAROLED 4A**

"The years-long exhaustive investigation for a genuine search for the truth revealed that Jens Soering's claims of innocence are without merit," her statement noted.

That's the most important result of the Parole Board's actions, according to Major Ricky Gardner of the Bedford County Sheriff's Office (BCSO).

"It validates the jury's decision back in '90 and what I've said since '86," stated Gardner, the chief investigator in the case. "They were the only two people who had anything to gain from murdering her parents."

The case received international attention because Soering was the son of a German diplomat and over the years has continued to attract attention as Soering has tried to convince the Parole Board, celebrities and Virginia governors that he was innocent.

"I'm disappointed that the Parole Board decided to parole him now," Gardner said. "However, I recognize the fact that they have the absolute right to do that."

Derek and Nancy Haysom were murdered at their Bedford County home on March 30, 1985. Derek Haysom had been stabbed 36 times; Nancy Haysom was stabbed seven times. Both had their throats cut from ear to ear.

## The Parole Board's Explanation

In making its case for parole, Bennett said that "releasing Jens Soering and Elizabeth Haysom to their ICE deportation detainers is appropriate based on their youth at the time of the offenses, institutional adjustment and their length of incarceration."

The statement noted that both Soering and Haysom are now in their mid-50s "and have served over 33 years for the horrific crimes that they committed."

"Their release and permanent expulsion from the United States is a tremendous cost benefit to the taxpayers of the Commonwealth of Virginia and we have determined that their release does not pose a risk to public safety," Bennett added.

The Parole Board said Sheriff Mike Brown, Major Gardner and Bedford County Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance "have at all times demonstrated professionalism and we are grateful for their transparency during this lengthy investigation."

Bennett said the Parole Board's Special Investigations Unit conducted "a very lengthy and in-depth investigation, which included input from the Haysom family."

"Victim input is taken very seriously and is an important part of our consideration," Bennett added. "We also have a Victim Services Unit which keeps the victim's family informed and assists with their

needs."

In a separate statement to the Bulletin, Bennett said that many offenders who are granted release have served decades in prison after committing violent offenses; most while in their youth and who are now considered geriatric, (age 50 or older as defined by the Department of Corrections.)

The Parole Board's "NOT grant rate" is about 90 percent annually, meaning about 90 percent of the offenders who come before the Parole Board are denied parole, Bennett stated.

"This month we have also released to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for deportation another offender who is a Belgium citizen and whose crime, length of incarceration and age at the time of the offense is similar to Jens Soering's and Elizabeth Haysom's," she added.

Bennett stated that when making parole decisions, the Parole Board reviews the sentencing guidelines that courts are required to consider under the Truth and Sentencing Law of today. "Taking into account good time credits they would receive for their exemplary conduct, both Jens and Elizabeth have already served well in excess of an average sentence under today's law for the crimes that they committed; and in fact, have served a sentence just shy of the highest range of the sentencing guidelines. The sentencing guidelines recommend an average sentence of 33 years and 3 months. They have served just shy of 34 years," she added.

"We regret that the decision to release and permanently deport Jens Soering and Elizabeth Haysom has been difficult for many in the Bedford Community," Bennett stated. "I want to assure you that we are in direct contact with the Haysom family and remain in place to support them. ... Our hope is that the community of Bedford can start healing and put this horrible crime behind them."

## Local, State Officials' Reactions

"The recent decision by the parole board leaves me with two very distinct, and equally strong, responses," stated Bedford County Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance. "I am thankful that the Parole Board determined that Soering's claims of innocence lacked merit. After an extensive review of all the evidence, and not what was being portrayed in press conferences held outside of Bedford County, the Parole Board and Governor knew a Bedford County jury got it right when convicting Soering. They found that the investigation and prosecution of him were done by agencies, and individuals, of high character and ethics. So I do thank the Parole Board for both their intense and thorough investigation and for their confirma-

tion of Soering's guilt."

But he wasn't in favor of Haysom and Soering getting paroled.

"The decision to parole is both troublesome and extremely disappointing," Nance stated. "A Bedford County jury has already spoken on this case, and I believe that decision should not have been disturbed. Additionally, although I respect the hard work that they do, I am further discouraged that Soering, who takes no responsibility for his horrific crimes, would be released at the same time as Ms. Haysom, who both took responsibility for her actions and also assisted the Commonwealth in bringing Soering to justice."

State Senator Steve Newman called decision to parole the two "a sad day" for many in the Bedford area and "one that reminds us that elections have consequences."

Soering initially confessed to the murders—but later recanted—and Haysom pleaded guilty as an accessory to the brutal murder of her parents in 1985. Soering was given two life sentences and Haysom a 90-year term.

"After the Soering family from Germany waged a political campaign with Democrat politicians for the past 16 years, they were able to secure the release of both felons from Virginia's Correctional System. The members of the Bedford County legislative delegation, along with Sheriff Mike Brown, have consistently advocated for both Haysom and Soering to remain in custody to serve the full length of their imposed sentences."

Senator Newman said the decision "by the Democrat-appointed members of the Virginia Parole Board undermines our sense of justice and is a slap in the face to the remaining family members of the victims."

Sixth District Congressman Ben Cline also commented, stating: "I am shocked and appalled by the Virginia State Parole Board's decision to grant parole to Jens Soering and Elizabeth Haysom, who are imprisoned for their roles in the gruesome 1985 double murder of Derek and Nancy Haysom in Bedford County. The impact of the Haysoms' murder is still felt by the Bedford community today. This decision, based not on any remorse by the murderers for their crimes, but instead on some supposed cost-benefit to Virginia, is an insult to the families of the victims and to the principles of justice and the rule of law."

## What Part Did Politics Play?

A decade ago when then Governor Tim Kaine, a Democrat, was leaving office, he quietly attempted to get the US Justice Department to release Soering to Germany. When that attempt became known, Sen. Newman and others worked to thwart that request and when Republican Governor Robert McDonnell

took office he squashed the attempt.

"I know that the political efforts of the well-connected Jens Soering has been unending for decades," Sen. Newman stated. "I should have probably seen this coming."

The members of the Parole Board are appointed by the governor and Newman stated that produced an opportunity for Soering to capitalize. Soering, Newman said, has had ties with the Clinton and Obama administrations.

"The question of guilt or innocence was settled 34 years ago," Sen. Newman stated. "I think that (their release) is unfortunate and has really been an attempt to rewrite what the jury saw in Bedford County."

Elections have consequences, Newman stated. "If you are well connected and wealthy enough (you can) put forward an alternate media narrative. If you get enough of your like-minded friends together you can be released from prison because of your media connections," he said.

He added that Haysom won the "political lottery" by being attached to the efforts to get Soering released.

"They had no choice," he said. "If they had just done Jens Soering and left her there the political nature of this would have been untenable."

Newman said his staff will be looking into just how normal this type of release is. "It does raise questions," he said of the potential political nature of Soering's release.

"There is a different justice system for someone in the inner city of Lynchburg than someone who is well connected from Germany to the Democratic party," he said.

## The Case

Gardner was pleased Soering wasn't pardoned and was appreciative of the thorough investigation by the Parole Board's team looking into the case.

"I spent a great deal of time with them, going back over everything in the case," he said. Gardner said the investigators went over all of the leads in the case.

He said the case was like a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle, stating you can't take just a few of the pieces and try to make a case of innocence from those.

"You can't cherry pick them and then say he's innocent," Gardner said of the facts of the case. "You have to have all of the pieces to the puzzle."

After the murders, Haysom and Soering fled to Europe and were eventually captured there. Because England didn't recognize the death penalty, the commonwealth had to agree not to seek the death penalty in the case.

In a letter to Gov. McDonnell in 2011, Gardner laid out his case against

Soering and Haysom.

"This was by far the worst crime scene I have ever witnessed," Gardner stated in his letter.

Gardner said that Soering, when caught in England, confessed on three separate occasions to murdering the Haysoms that Saturday night in March of 1985.

Haysom, a first-year student at the University of Virginia told Gardner that the weekend her parents were murdered, she and Soering, her boyfriend at the time, rented a car in Charlottesville and drove to Washington D.C. for the weekend. The car had been driven 669 miles that weekend, which immediately raised suspicions. The round trip from Charlottesville, Virginia to Washington D.C. is approximately 240 miles.

On Sunday, October 6, 1985, Soering, a University of Virginia Jefferson Scholar, drove to Bedford and was interviewed. Gardner said Soering was uncooperative. Soon after is when the couple left the country.

"Jens confessed three different times that he murdered the Haysoms and Elizabeth stayed in Washington to create an alibi," Gardner said in his letter. Those confessions came after being caught in England for check fraud.

Gardner stated evidence showed Haysom and Soering began planning the murders several months before they were committed.

After committing the murders and going back to Washington D.C., Gardner said Soering told Haysom that her father had "refused to die and he fought like a big bear." "At the end of the day, Jens and Elizabeth had confessed and their confessions were identical," Gardner said in his letter.

"(Since recanting) Jens Soering has never shown any remorse, nor has he ever taken any responsibility for killing Mr. and Mrs. Haysom. He viciously attacked the victims in their home and nearly cut off their heads. He was going to kill me if Elizabeth had not stopped him. I think these facts alone should disqualify him from any special treatment," Gardner wrote to McDonnell.

## Soering's Letter: Accepting responsibility?

A prolific writer since being incarcerated, Soering also wrote numerous letters, including one to the Parole Board in 2006. In the letter Soering said he "accepted my responsibility for the deaths of Derek and Nancy Haysom and the suffering I inflicted on their children, my own family and -- as odd as this may sound -- even Elizabeth Haysom."

But Soering's letter was not a confession, but rather stating that his responsibility rested in the fact that he had

not stopped Haysom from committing the murders.

"Certainly it is true that you believe I was at the crime scene and committed the murders myself, whereas I know this is not so. But you and I do agree that I am responsible for those deaths, and for all the suffering of innocent others that followed," he wrote. "Even though I was not physically present at the crime scene (and, indeed, was not part of any planning -- if there was any? Because I could have and should have prevented the murders of Derek and Nancy Haysom."

Soering stated in his letter that several months before the murders he and Elizabeth spent a weekend at her parents' house while they were out of town. "We spent most of our time doing what teenagers usually do when there is a bed and no adult supervision," he wrote. But then he stated Haysom showed him nude photographs her mother had taken of her and told him how she was sexually abused.

"It was easier to let the whole matter drop and go back upstairs and have sex -- which is why we had come to stay there at her parents' house that weekend anyway," he stated. "In later years -- after I began practicing Centering Prayer, in 2000 I gradually came to understand that this incident was the greatest failure of my life, and the direct antecedent of the murders, and ultimately the reason why I am in prison today. Elizabeth did not kill her parents because they -- or at least her mother -- sexually abused her. In my opinion, the immediate cause of the murders was that she had stolen her mother's jewelry on the weekend before the murders; and in the confrontation about this theft the following weekend, she killed them. ... In Elizabeth's case, such an incident led to murder because of the long-standing rage inside her over the sexual abuse. This, anyhow, is what I believe. And I also believe that I could have prevented all of this."

A lengthy letter, Soering concluded by stating, "those murders occurred only because I was a selfish, unloving, stupid young man in 1985. I really do not feel these last 20 years of incarceration have been undeserved, and I certainly no longer feel like a victim. I deserved punishment -- and, believe me, I have been punished."

He went on to say he wanted to work in the prisons in Germany to help others.



# SOTO-BONILLA GUILTY OF CAPITAL MURDER

## 'No mother should have to see pictures of her child brutally murdered like that'

By TOM WILMOTH

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Raymond Wood was full of life; he was good at making other people feel happy.

He liked to play video games, had a lot of shoes and hoped to become a Marine.

But on March 27, 2017, Raymond Wood was brutally murdered on a rural road in Bedford County. That changed everything for Wood's mother, Marjorie Stagno.

"No mother should have to see pictures

of her child brutally murdered like that," Stagno told a Bedford County jury last Thursday. "That night changed my life."

A week prior to that statement, Stagno had taken the stand as the capital murder trial of 22-year-old Kevin Josue Soto Bonilla began. She described her son to the jury and the last words they spoke to each other: "I love you Mom," he said to her.

"I love you, too," she responded.

"Those were the last words I heard from

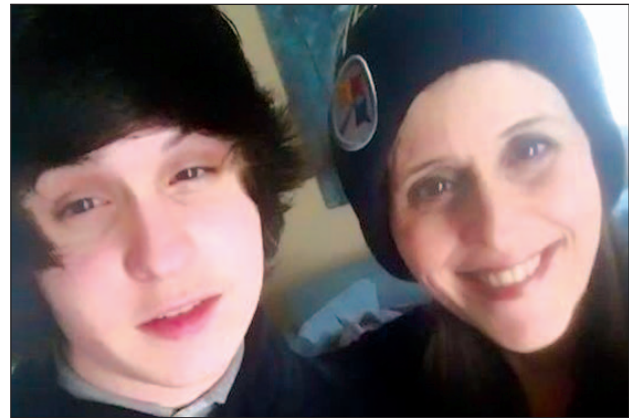


Photo courtesy of Tim Saunders/WDBJ7

Raymond Wood and his mom, Marjorie Stagno, in one of their last photos together.

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See **GUILTY 3A**



# Guilty:

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him," she told the jury.

Raymond would often call his mom and when he didn't that March day in 2017 she knew something was wrong. "I called my son's cell phone; it went straight to voice mail," she said. That had never happened before.

Stagno hurried home from work and began to look around. She went out searching for him in her car; she called area hospitals.

In the early morning hours of March 27, she feared the worst.

Taking a flashlight, Stagno began to search around the house. She spotted some items — his cell phone was close to the road. "I ran in the house and I screamed at the top of my lungs because I knew something wasn't right," she said.

She then found his glasses—Raymond couldn't see anything without them on. She found a dark ski mask. She piled the items up; she contacted the police.

Stagno said she knew her son was dead. "I just knew," she said.

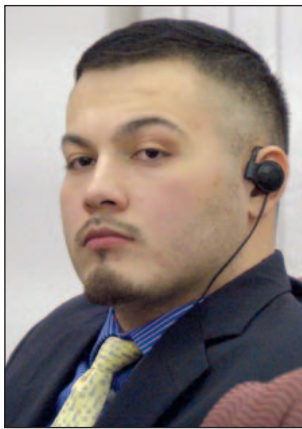
Last Wednesday, the jury found Soto Bonilla guilty of capital murder in connection with Raymond Wood's death. On Thursday, midway through the sentencing phase of his trial, Soto Bonilla changed his plea to the capital murder charge and two other charges to guilty.

In accordance with a plea agreement in the case, Soto Bonilla received a life sentence without parole on the capital murder conviction. He also received a life sentence for his conviction of abduction for pecuniary benefit and 10 years for gang participation. Those sentences run consecutively and Soto Bonilla will live the rest of his life in prison, according to Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance.

On March 17, 2017, Raymond Wood was driven from his home in Lynchburg to Roaring Run Road in Bedford County and brutally murdered by alleged members of the MS-13 gang, including Soto Bonilla. Soto Bonilla is the second defendant in the case to be convicted for his participation in the murder by a Bedford County jury.

Victor Rodas, who set up the meeting with Wood and drove the car to pick him up, was earlier convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to 55 years in prison.

Wood was beaten unconscious while in the car and then thrown out of the car and stabbed multiple times with a 17-inch knife on Roaring Run



Photos courtesy N&A Kevin Josue Soto Bonilla during the two-week trial in Bedford.



Bedford Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance tells the jury what happened to Raymond Wood.

Road. One of his hands was cut off and his throat was slit. Testimony during the trial noted that while being beaten in the car, Wood cried out for his mom.

Stagno's testimony during the sentencing phase as the Commonwealth's only witness, appeared to move Soto Bonilla. She gave a tearful and heartfelt statement to the jury of how the murder of her son had affected her and her family. "My son was shown no mercy," she told the jury.

During that testimony, Stagno told the jury how after her son's murder she hasn't been able to do much. She lost a good-paying job and her home. "I stay as strong as I possibly can," she said, holding tears back the best she could. "Mother's Day is very hard."

Raymond would make his mom homemade cards every year. The last one she received was in 2016.

She doesn't celebrate her birthday. "There's nothing more to celebrate," she explained.

The hearing broke for lunch and during that time

Soto Bonilla decided to take responsibility for killing Wood. He apologized to Wood's mother when he changed his pleas to guilty.

By doing so, Soto Bonilla waived his right to appeal. There likely would have been years of appeals because it was a capital murder case. He also took the death penalty off the table as part of the agreement.

Nance said the Commonwealth accepted the pleas after talking with Wood's mother and the rest of the family.

Upon entering his pleas, Soto Bonilla apologized to the family of Raymond Wood. "I regret it from my heart and I pray God may give you the strength to move forward," Soto Bonilla said.

The attorneys

Nance said that by accepting the terms of the plea agreement, Raymond Wood's family gave the greatest gift of grace he has ever seen.

He said this will allow the family to go through the grieving process without years of appeals on the capital murder

conviction. He said justice prevailed in this case.

He praised the jury for its work, noting the difficult pictures and testimony they had to see and hear. He also praised the team in the Commonwealth's Attorney Office for their work. "It's a great privilege to have them by my side," he said.

Defense Attorney Anthony Anderson said his team was exhausted—it's been a two-year journey for them since being appointed to represent

Soto Bonilla. "You get emotionally attached to what you are doing," he said. Moneta Attorney Aaron Houchens served alongside Anderson and Houchens got to know Soto Bonilla best.

Anderson said he felt his client's statement to the family was heartfelt and was made in response to Marjorie Stagno's testimony on the stand. "He made the statement to Mr. Wood's mother directly," Anderson said of Soto Bonilla taking responsibility for his

actions. "I hope that will have some closure for her."

His lawyers also noted that in representing Soto Bonilla, they got to know some of his backstory concerning his upbringing in El Salvador and his family's problems. One of the reasons he came to this country was to help support his family, Houchens noted.

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**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2019**

**Refuse, scheduled for collected on Tuesday, December 24, 2019 will be picked up on Monday, December 23, 2019.**

**Refuse, scheduled for collected on Wednesday, December 25, 2019 will be picked up on Thursday, December 26, 2019.**

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**Wednesday, December 25, 2019**

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him," she told the jury.

Raymond would often call his mom and when he didn't that March day in 2017 she knew something was wrong. "I called my son's cell phone; it went straight to voice mail," she said. That had never happened before.

Stagno hurried home from work and began to look around. She went out searching for him in her car; she called area hospitals.

In the early morning hours of March 27, she feared the worst.

Taking a flashlight, Stagno began to search around the house. She spotted some items – his cell phone was close to the road. "I ran in the house and I screamed at the top of my lungs because I knew something wasn't right," she said.

She then found his glasses—Raymond couldn't see anything without them on. She found a dark ski mask. She piled the items up; she contacted the police.

Stagno said she knew her son was dead. "I just knew," she said.

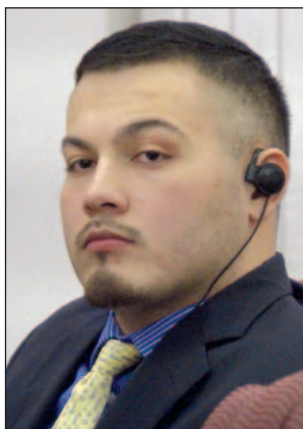
Last Wednesday, the jury found Soto Bonilla guilty of capital murder in connection with Raymond Wood's death. On Thursday, midway through the sentencing phase of his trial, Soto Bonilla changed his plea to the capital murder charge and two other charges to guilty.

In accordance with a plea agreement in the case, Soto Bonilla received a life sentence without parole on the capital murder conviction. He also received a life sentence for his conviction of abduction for pecuniary benefit and 10 years for gang participation. Those sentences run consecutively and Soto Bonilla will live the rest of his life in prison, according to Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance.

On March 17, 2017, Raymond Wood was driven from his home in Lynchburg to Roaring Run Road in Bedford County and brutally murdered by alleged members of the MS-13 gang, including Soto Bonilla. Soto Bonilla is the second defendant in the case to be convicted for his participation in the murder by a Bedford County jury.

Victor Rodas, who set up the meeting with Wood and drove the car to pick him up, was earlier convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to 55 years in prison.

Wood was beaten unconscious while in the car and then thrown out of the car and stabbed multiple times with a 17-inch knife on Roaring Run



Photos courtesy N&A Kevin Josue Soto Bonilla during the two-week trial in Bedford.



Bedford Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance tells the jury what happened to Raymond Wood.

Road. One of his hands was cut off and his throat was slit. Testimony during the trial noted that while being beaten in the car, Wood cried out for his mom.

Stagno's testimony during the sentencing phase as the Commonwealth's only witness, appeared to move Soto Bonilla. She gave a tearful and heartfelt statement to the jury of how the murder of her son had affected her and her family. "My son was shown no mercy," she told the jury.

During that testimony, Stagno told the jury how after her son's murder she hasn't been able to do much. She lost a good-paying job and her home. "I stay as strong as I possibly can," she said, holding tears back the best she could. "Mother's Day is very hard."

Raymond would make his mom homemade cards every year. The last one she received was in 2016.

She doesn't celebrate her birthday. "There's nothing more to celebrate," she explained.

The hearing broke for lunch and during that time

Soto Bonilla decided to take responsibility for killing Wood. He apologized to Wood's mother when he changed his pleas to guilty.

By doing so, Soto Bonilla waived his right to appeal. There likely would have been years of appeals because it was a capital murder case. He also took the death penalty off the table as part of the agreement.

Nance said the Commonwealth accepted the pleas after talking with Wood's mother and the rest of the family.

Upon entering his pleas, Soto Bonilla apologized to the family of Raymond Wood. "I regret it from my heart and I pray God may give you the strength to move forward," Soto Bonilla said.

The attorneys

Nance said that by accepting the terms of the plea agreement, Raymond Wood's family gave the greatest gift of grace he has ever seen.

He said this will allow the family to go through the grieving process without years of appeals on the capital murder

conviction. He said justice prevailed in this case.

He praised the jury for its work, noting the difficult pictures and testimony they had to see and hear. He also praised the team in the Commonwealth's Attorney Office for their work. "It's a great privilege to have them by my side," he said.

Defense Attorney Anthony Anderson said his team was exhausted—it's been a two-year journey for them since being appointed to represent

Soto Bonilla. "You get emotionally attached to what you are doing," he said. Moneta Attorney Aaron Houchens served alongside Anderson and Houchens got to know Soto Bonilla best.

Anderson said he felt his client's statement to the family was heartfelt and was made in response to Marjorie Stagno's testimony on the stand. "He made the statement to Mr. Wood's mother directly," Anderson said of Soto Bonilla taking responsibility for his

actions. "I hope that will have some closure for her."

His lawyers also noted that in representing Soto Bonilla, they got to know some of his backstory concerning his upbringing in El Salvador and his family's problems. One of the reasons he came to this country was to help support his family, Houchens noted.

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**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
**HOLIDAY REFUSE COLLECTION**

Due to the **Christmas Holiday**, there will be no refuse collection on the following dates:

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2019**  
**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2019**

**Refuse, scheduled for collected on Tuesday, December 24, 2019 will be picked up on Monday, December 23, 2019.**

**Refuse, scheduled for collected on Wednesday, December 25, 2019 will be picked up on Thursday, December 26, 2019.**

**The Town Landfill will be closed on:**  
**Tuesday, December 24, 2019**  
**Wednesday, December 25, 2019**

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