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Man found guilty in deaths of O.C. girl, 4 L.A. County women

It is Rodney James Alcalá's third conviction in the murder of Robin Samsoe, 12, of Huntington Beach in 1979, and his first trial in the other cases.

By Paloma Esquivel and Christopher Goffard

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Rodney James Alcalá, a onetime photographer and "Dating Game" contestant, was convicted Thursday of murdering four women and a 12-year-old girl during a killing rampage in Los Angeles and Orange counties in the late 1970s.

An Orange County jury took less than two days to render the verdict after a bizarre trial in which Alcalá represented himself, offering a rambling defense to accusations that he was a prolific serial killer who tortured his victims.

It was the third time Alcalá, 66, has been convicted of the murder of Robin Samsoe, a 12-year-old Huntington Beach girl last seen alive riding her bike to ballet class in June 1979. Both previous times he was condemned to death, but the convictions were overturned. He has been in custody since his 1979 arrest.

Robert Samsoe, the youngest victim's brother, who was 14 when his sister was killed, said the family was satisfied with the verdict but not at all certain that the ordeal was over.

"We believe that anything could happen," he said. "It's not a victory yet. Until they inject him, or shoot him, or hang him, it's not over because of our appeals process."

To Robin's family and others, the case embodied the limitations and failings of the criminal justice system, with its protracted appeals, tossed convictions and decades of waiting.

To the families of the Los Angeles County women, however, Alcalá's long wait on death row helped solve their murders.

It was only in recent years that a California law required Alcalá to provide a DNA sample to a statewide database, allowing investigators to link him to the four unsolved murders. One had initially been blamed on the Hillside Strangler, the name given to Angelo Buono Jr. and Kenneth Bianchi, who were convicted in a string of murders in the hills above Los Angeles in the 1970s.

The jury of seven men and five women convicted Alcalá of five counts of first-degree murder.

Each carries a special circumstance charge that makes Alcala subject to the death penalty.

As the verdicts were read, family members and friends of the victims gasped and cried, hugging each other and shaking hands. Alcala, motionless and upright in a sports coat and plastic-rimmed glasses, said nothing.

Nancy Casserly of West Covina said victim Jill Parenteau had been her maid of honor and a friend since the two were age 6.

"There's not a memory in my childhood that doesn't include her," she said. "There's no justice, no closure, just a small bit of satisfaction that she had her trial and someone was held responsible."

According to evidence presented at trial, Alcala's Southern California string of killings began with his attack on Jill Barcomb, 18, a recent arrival from New York whose body was found in the Hollywood Hills in November 1977. He used a rock to smash in her face and strangled her with the leg from a pair of pants.

A month later, he raped and murdered hospital nurse Georgia Wixted, 27, who was found in her Malibu apartment. He had beaten her with a hammer and strangled her with a nylon stocking.

The next June, he raped and murdered Charlotte Lamb, 32, a Santa Monica legal secretary, strangling her with a shoelace and leaving her body in the laundry room of an El Segundo apartment complex.

A year later, in June 1979, he attacked restaurant worker Parenteau, 21, raping her in her Burbank apartment and strangling her with a cord. Alcala cut himself on a window as he fled, leaving blood at the scene.

Later that month, he spotted 12-year-old Robin Samsøe on the beach, asked her to pose for photographs, and later abducted her as she rode a bicycle to an afternoon ballet class, and killed her. Her decomposed body, mauled by animals, was later found in the Angeles National Forest above Pasadena.

Prosecutors painted Alcala as a sadistic monster who sexually tortured his victims, posed them and possibly took photos. He had a long history of violence against young women. In 1972, he was convicted of kidnapping, raping and beating an 8-year-old girl in Hollywood but was paroled two years later. At the time he abducted and killed Robin, he was awaiting trial on charges of beating and raping a 15-year-old Riverside girl, for which he was convicted in 1980 and sentenced to a nine-year prison term.

At the recent trial, Alcala, a UCLA graduate who claims to have a genius IQ, acted as his own attorney and took the stand and asked and answered his own questions.

Throughout the trial, Alcala largely ignored the allegations in the Los Angeles cases -- which involved DNA, blood and fingerprint evidence -- and focused on defending himself in the

Samsoe case, which did not rely heavily on physical evidence.

At one point, Alcala, a onetime typesetter at the Los Angeles Times, showed the jury a 20-second clip of his winning appearance as Bachelor No. 1 in a 1978 episode of "The Dating Game" in order to prove his claim that he did not take a pair of earrings from Robin. Alcala's long, feathered hair and the poor quality of the VHS recording made the earrings almost impossible to see. He showed the tape hoping to prove he already had the earrings at the time of the taping, which was before the murder.

Prosecutors believe Alcala responsible for at least three murders in New York, but said it is not clear whether he will be tried for them.

Robin's brother Robert said he was happy with the verdict and resolved to wait out the years needed for the appeals process.

"It's another victory for Robin," he said. "Robin didn't die for nothing. Her death stopped a maniac."

Don McCartin, the 84-year-old retired Orange County judge who presided over Alcala's second murder trial, said he felt terrible for Robin's mother, who has spent decades attending court hearings and following the legal complexities involving her daughter's killer.

"Poor Mrs. Samsoe, this is her third trial, and she would've been better off if they gave him life without parole and forgot it," McCartin said. "I felt sorry for her having to go through it again."

The penalty phase of the trial will begin Tuesday.