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Sex offender John Albert Gardner III sentenced to life in prison

He was spared the death penalty as part of a deal for pleading guilty to murdering Chelsea King and Amber Dubois during rape attempts.

By Tony Perry, Los Angeles Times

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Amid anguished and angry comments from the parents of his victims, registered sex offender John Albert Gardner III was formally sentenced Friday to life in prison without the chance of parole for the murder and rape of two teenage girls in northern San Diego County.

The families of Amber Dubois, 14, and Chelsea King, 17, spoke in court of the bright, hopeful, innocent lives that were violently destroyed by Gardner and of how their broken bodies were discarded like trash.

The courtroom in San Diego County Superior Court was packed with family members, investigators and reporters — many of whom had tears in their eyes.

Dubois' family showed a video of their daughter, accompanied by recorded music, and described her as a loving teenager who enjoyed reading and "was kind beyond measure" and "not about the mall or being self-involved." The day she disappeared, she was carrying money to buy a lamb for a 4-H project.

King's family spoke of their daughter as a perfect child, an honor student at Poway High School destined for college and a career helping others. A video was shown with comments from her school friends about their loss and their memories of her laugh and selflessness.

Gardner, shackled and with armed sheriff's deputies standing near him, kept his head down during the family statements and wept. He looked up only briefly when King's mother, Kelly, twice demanded, "Look at me," and waited for his response.

Gardner, 31, pleaded guilty last month to murdering the teens, both during rape attempts. He admitted strangling King and stabbing Dubois. As part of a plea bargain, he was spared the death penalty.

"There are not enough words to describe the agony my family has gone through minute by minute" since her daughter's abduction, said Dubois' mother, Carrie McGonigle.

King's father, Brent, said she "looked for the good in everyone. I'm not sure she could

comprehend the pure evil that sits before us...I am filled with a rage that I didn't know I possessed."

Dubois disappeared in February 2009 while walking to class at Escondido High School. King vanished a year later while jogging near Lake Hodges. A pair of panties found on the jogging path two days later led investigators to Gardner, whose DNA was in a state database after his five-year prison sentence for attacking a 13-year-old girl.

After his arrest in the King slaying, Gardner admitted killing Dubois and led investigators to her remains northeast of Escondido. In a television interview while in jail, Gardner said he was seized by an uncontrollable rage and could not stop when he began attacking the two victims. He blamed a life full of disappointment and maltreatment.

"I hate myself, I really do," Gardner told KFMB-TV Channel 8. "There is no taking back what I did, and if I could, yes, I would. But I was out of control. If I was able to stop myself in the middle of it, I would have, and I could not. I was out of control."

Both families have called for changes in how the criminal justice system treats sex offenders. The King family, with the backing of a state legislator and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, has called for a "Chelsea's Law" that would give life sentences to sex offenders who attack minors, and also require a lifetime of GPS monitoring for sex criminals.

Dubois' parents have criticized the system for letting Gardner out of prison early and for not putting him back behind bars when he was found to be violating his parole, among other things, by living close to a school.

King's father called Gardner "a monster and an animal." Dubois' father, Maurice, said Gardner was an animal-like "predator" who should never have been let loose.

Brent King said he hoped that Gardner, after his death, "goes to the deepest level of hell as described in the classics as 'a burning lake of blood.' "

He also criticized Gardner's mother, a psychiatric nurse, for not turning her son in to authorities after Dubois disappeared.

Candice Moncayo, 22, a jogger whom Gardner attempted to abduct just weeks before King was killed, said she still has nightmares about his attack.

"I have spent countless hours terrified and nauseated like a scared rabbit," she said, her voice breaking. "I came here to stand as witness for Chelsea and Amber."