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Sex offender pleads guilty to killing two teen girls

In a deal to avoid the death penalty, John Albert Gardner III admits to the murders of Chelsea King, 17, and Amber Dubois, 14.

By Tony Perry

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Reporting from San Diego

A 31-year-old registered sex offender pleaded guilty Friday to murdering two teenage girls in northern San Diego County in a deal that spares him from the death penalty.

John Albert Gardner III, who previously served five years in prison for beating and molesting a 13-year-old girl, pleaded guilty to the murders of Chelsea King, 17, and Amber Dubois, 14, both during rape attempts. In exchange for his plea at the hastily arranged hearing, Gardner will be returned to prison for life, without the possibility of parole.

Chelsea, an honor student at Poway High School, disappeared Feb. 25 while jogging near Lake Hodges. Gardner was arrested Feb. 28, and on March 2 law enforcement searchers found Chelsea's body in a shallow grave 10 feet from the water's edge.

Amber's [skeletal remains were found four days](#) later buried in the rugged Pala area northeast of Escondido. She had disappeared Feb. 13, 2009, while walking to class at Escondido High School.

With his head bowed, Gardner admitted Friday to Superior Court Judge David Danielsen that he strangled Chelsea and stabbed Amber. He also admitted to attacking a female jogger Dec. 27 in a rape attempt at Rancho Bernardo Community Park. The victim managed to escape Gardner's grasp.

The parents of both murdered girls were in the courtroom, as were a dozen supporters, some wearing T-shirts and buttons with pictures of the two victims.

Deputy Dist. Atty. Kristen Spieler told Danielsen that Dist. Atty. Bonnie Dumanis agreed to the plea bargain after "careful consideration of the feelings and opinions" of the victims' families.

In a news conference after the plea, Maurice Dubois, Amber's father, said the agreement allowed "justice and closure" for his daughter. Brent King, Chelsea's father, said lengthy court proceedings would have had a "destructive effect" on their 13-year-old son, Tyler, and the community and distracted from the family's campaign for tougher laws for sex offenders.

Dumanis said that without Gardner's guilty plea, her office would not have had enough evidence to take him to trial for Amber's murder.

Gardner and his attorney declined the judge's offer to comment on why Gardner agreed to plead guilty. He had pleaded not guilty to the murder and rape of Chelsea on March 3. The discovery of Amber's remains, which followed months of search efforts by hundreds of volunteers, so soon after Gardner's arrest had led to speculation that he had led authorities to her body, but until Friday his indictment for her killing was not public.

Gardner's arrest has sparked widespread public criticism over [allegedly sloppy supervision of sex offenders](#).

Documents indicate that Gardner, who was released from prison in 2005, could have been sent back to prison for violating parole on several occasions, including for living too close to a school and missing meetings with his parole officer.

Other documents indicate that Gardner has long been diagnosed as having bipolar disorder and been prescribed mood-stabilizing drugs.

This week, accompanied by Chelsea's parents, Assemblyman Nathan Fletcher (R-San Diego) said he would introduce [Chelsea's Law](#), a bill that would allow for life sentences for first-time child molesters and for lifetime use of global positioning system monitoring of all sex offenders.

Although a gag order has prevented authorities from discussing either killing or the evidence linking Gardner to the crimes, a search warrant indicates that investigators found shovels and a pickax at Gardner's home in Lake Elsinore.

At the request of Gardner's public defender, Danielsens continued the gag order until an April 22 hearing. Danielsens said he has "grave reservations" about continuing the order but will allow lawyers to make their arguments. Danielsens made an exception to the gag order to allow Dumanis to comment to reporters.

The sentencing is not official until a June 1 court hearing. At that hearing, the relatives and friends of the victims can address the court. Under the plea bargain, Gardner is eligible to be treated as a mentally disturbed sex offender, Danielsens said.