



Print Page

Jennings released from prison after serving 12 years

By KATHERINE HEAD
Bigfork Eagle

On Dec. 5, 1991, four young men dragged 51-year-old Luis Adam Cornejo-Mena to a logging road near Johnson Creek in the upper Swan Valley. There they bludgeoned him to death. Now, just 13 years later, all four of the young men are out of incarceration.

Justin Jennings was released from prison in Deer Lodge on March 17. According to the Montana Department of Corrections online offender records, Jennings has taken up residence near Echo Lake.

Jennings was sentenced on Sept. 10, 1992, to mitigated deliberate homicide for his part in Mena's murder.

"He and some buddies, four altogether, took this guy up a Forest Service road and beat him to death. One hit him with a baseball bat and Justin hit him with the back of a hatchet," said Flathead County Probation/Parole Officer David Castro.

Jennings was 19 years old at the time of the killing. He is now 33. He was originally sentenced to a 25-year term, of which he had to serve half before parole eligibility. And half is what he served.

The others involved--Jason Adrian Barkee, Paul David Gorder and Corey Andrew Richardson--have also been paroled. Barkee was sentenced to a 30-year term; he was released Aug. 31, 2004, and now lives in Missoula. Gorder struck a deal for a 40-year sentence with 28 suspended; he was released into interstate compact July 2, 2002. Richardson received a 25-year term; he was released Jan. 7 of this year and now lives in Kalispell.

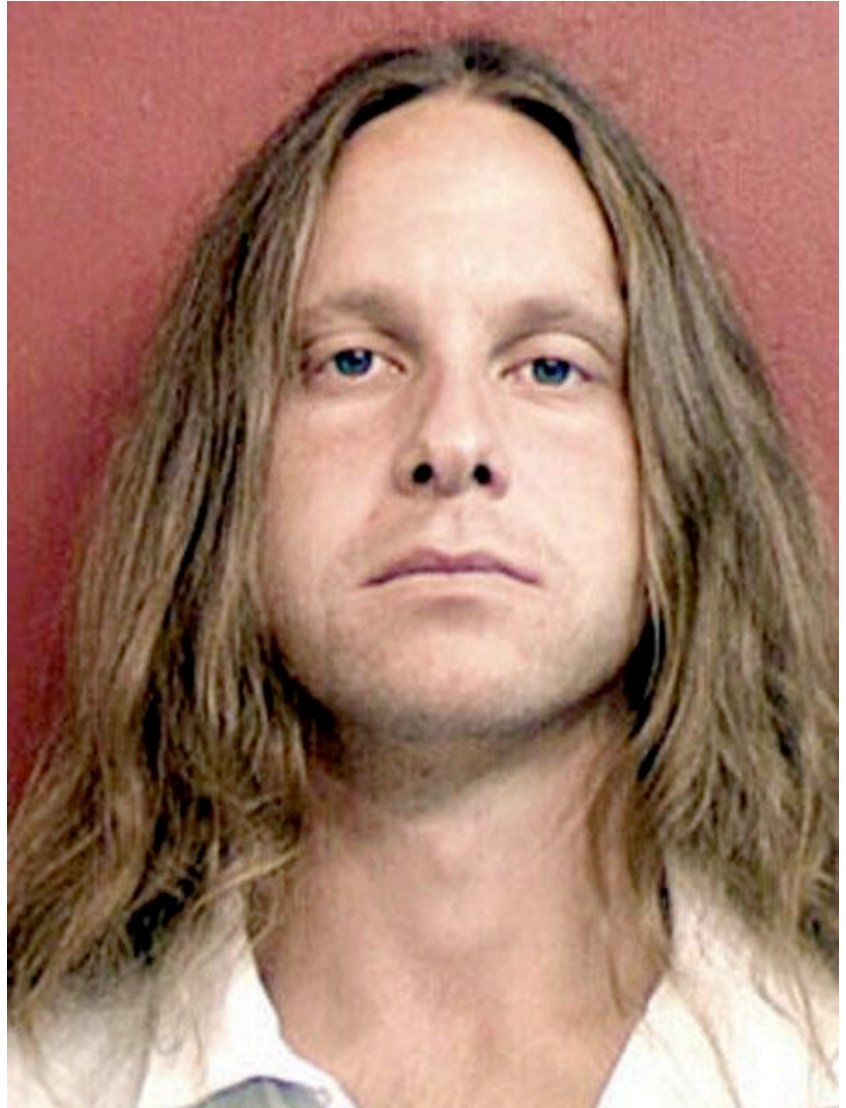
All four were convicted of mitigated deliberate homicide. Their return to society is due, in part, to "Good Time." Good time refers to the process of crediting an inmate's prison sentence with time off for good behavior.

"Prior to 1997, if you received a sentence to the Montana State Prison, you could receive good time for good behavior. You could earn a day for a day of good time and take a 25-year term and turn it into 12 and a half years," Castro explained. "As long as you sat, did your time and didn't start trouble or end up in the hole, they received good time."

The Montana Legislature eliminated good time effective Jan. 31, 1997. But for those offenders who committed crimes before that date, good time still applies. For offenses committed after Jan. 31, 1997, an offender must serve one-fourth of their sentence before achieving parole eligibility. Those with life sentences must serve 30 years.

Castro said that supervision is established prior to inmates being released.

"Usually judges do a suspended sentence so when an inmate returns to society, he's not just being kicked out the front gate. They are placed at the appropriate level of supervision once a week," he said. "The goal of the department is to push for community supervision for non-violent offenders. The goal is to place them back in the community to make room for the violent offenders."



All of the men involved in the Mena murder, with the exception of Gorder, were designated as violent offenders. According to Castro, 60 percent of the inmates in Deer Lodge are violent offenders.

Jennings is registered through the Flathead County Sheriff, although the crime was committed in Lake County. Castro said that in Flathead County, there are nine parole/probation officers to deal with 700 individuals on supervision. He added that of male inmates, 55 percent return to prison within the first year.

Jennings declined to be interviewed for this article. Before being incarcerated in 1992, Jennings said he hoped to attend drug and alcohol abuse counseling, and he hoped to earn a college degree.