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## **10 years on, teens' double murder still haunts in La Crescenta**

Michael Demirdjian, 25, is serving two life terms in the deaths of Blaine Talmo Jr., 14, and Christopher McCulloch, 13, found at a La Crescenta school. His family still believes justice wasn't served.

By Megan O'Neil, Los Angeles Times

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It's been a decade since La Crescenta resident Frank Hoogenhuizen peered over his back wall onto the playground of Valley View Elementary School and discovered the bodies of two boys, 14 and 13, lying near his property.

But time has done nothing to ease the memory.

"I said, 'Hey, guys, it's getting dark. Are you asleep?'" Hoogenhuizen recalled.

What he saw after looking closer made him pause. A large rock pressed against one of the boy's heads, which was badly discolored. The other boy was splayed under the playground slide. A 12-foot bench rested on top of him, one of the metal legs across his throat.

Hoogenhuizen's 911 call touched off a criminal [investigation](#) that at one point included more than half a dozen suspects. It also launched a media frenzy, with journalists canvassing the [crime scene](#) and the surrounding neighborhood.

And for the families of the victims — Blaine Talmo Jr., 14, of La Crescenta and Christopher McCulloch, 13, of La Cañada Flintridge — and the family of then-15-year-old Michael Demirdjian, who was convicted of the crimes, it was the start of an unending nightmare and painful questions, some of which remain unanswered.

Deputy Dist. Atty. Steve Barshop said it was a drug deal gone bad. Demirdjian was angry after fronting \$660 for drugs but getting nothing in return from the alleged dealer, a 19-year-old named Adam Walker. Demirdjian plotted to get his money back by ambushing Walker, the prosecutor argued.

The dispute culminated with the beating deaths of McCulloch and Talmo, the latter of whom had allegedly introduced Demirdjian to Walker, prosecutors said.

Demirdjian, who lived one block from the crime scene, told investigators that he saw the murders but did not participate. The three boys spent July 22, 2000, hanging out together at various

locations around La Crescenta, he said. That evening they met up with Walker at Valley View Elementary, where they drank alcohol and smoked marijuana.

Walker and McCulloch began to argue, it escalated into violence and Talmo tried to intervene, Demirdjian said. Walker attacked the pair, choking one and striking them on the head with a rock. Walker tossed him Talmo's wallet, Demirdjian said, and then ran home terrified.

Walker was never charged, nor did prosecutors present a case that put him at the scene. Instead, they focused on building a case against Demirdjian.

The first trial ended in an 8-4 hung jury. During a retrial, a jury convicted Demirdjian and a judge sentenced him to two consecutive 25-years-to-life terms.

"Sir, you've committed a crime like a man, and now you'll be treated and punished as a man," Superior Court Judge Ronald S. Coen said.

But some believe Demirdjian could not have acted alone. His defense attorney Charles T. Mathews continues to describe Demirdjian's conviction as a gross "miscarriage of justice."

"What all those people who say there had to be two people are struggling with is the reality that it just doesn't make sense that Michael could do it alone," Mathews said. "And they are right, because he couldn't have done it alone. But a much older, bigger, powerful guy could have, and did."

Glendale Police Sgt. Dennis Smith, the lead investigator in the case, said the forensic evidence against Demirdjian was conclusive. Nine bloody shoe prints led away from the playground. Investigators found a pair of laundered shoes with treads that matched the shoe prints in a trash can at the Demirdjian house.

They also found blood on a screen door, on the living room wall and on Demirdjian's pillow, Smith said. And they found Talmo's Quiksilver wallet and alarm clock.

"The evidence was spot on," Smith said.

Even after Demirdjian's conviction, prosecutors said he did not act alone and promised additional arrests. They never came. When asked about additional suspects, Smith said he was confident the responsible party was behind bars.

"There was no physical evidence linking anyone else to the crime," Smith said.

Demirdjian's parents still live in the same house, just down the street from Valley View Elementary. His mother said she visits her son, now 25, at a state prison every week. And the family continues to invest every resource, including hiring noted attorney Mark Geragos, to prove their son's innocence.

Talmo's parents, Blaine and Alana, have maintained a low profile since testifying in the murder

trials. Aileen Bristow, McCulloch's mother, is an active member of the Crescenta Valley Drug and Alcohol Coalition. Last year, she spoke publicly at Crescenta Valley High School about her son's death. All three declined to comment for this story but have stated in court and interviews during the last decade that Demirdjian's conviction did little to lessen their grief.