

Los Angeles jury to deliberate 2008 murders in Montebello

A downtown Los Angeles jury today is set to start weighing murder charges against a 17-year-old Montebello boy alleged to have fatally shot a man and his 12-year-old son during a high school graduation party.

Angel Sosa is charged as an adult in the June 21, 2008, shooting deaths of Juan Garcia, 44, and his son Albert.

In closing arguments last week, Deputy District Attorney Michele Hanisee told the seven-man, five-woman jury that Sosa was identified "by numerous people as the shooter."

But Sosa attorney Jeri Polen said more witnesses "didn't pick anybody."

Both sides agreed that the fatal shootings at a Montebello high school graduation party stemmed from an earlier confrontation just beyond the backyard fence of the house in the 100 block of East Madison Avenue, where the party took place.

"Somebody got (punched) ... a bottle might have been thrown and someone might have said, 'I'll be back,'" Polen said of the argument that led to gunfire.

"An hour later, someone did come back," Hanisee said. "He came back for revenge."

The prosecutor said the conflict took place between members of two Montebello graffiti-writing crews — WID and Southside Montebello.

"This wasn't a fight they were planning to lose," Hanisee said of WID, with which Sosa was allegedly affiliated.

At least one witness said she saw someone who looked like Sosa appear from behind a parked van and begin firing a 9 mm Beretta pistol into a crowd gathered near the backyard.

Garcia, of Perris, and his son, who lived in Hemet, died at Beverly Hospital in Montebello.

The victims "who had nothing to do with any of this, wind up dead," the prosecutor said.

In her closing argument, Polen said her client was never positively identified as the shooter.

A dozen witnesses couldn't identify Sosa as the gunman, or picked someone other than Sosa when shown a photo lineup by Montebello police detectives, the attorney said.

"The district attorney would like you to ignore those," Polen told the jury.

"In this case there's certainly, based upon the evidence, lots of reasonable doubt," she said in asking the jury to find Sosa not guilty.

The murder charges against Sosa include a special circumstance allegation of multiple murders. The teen is not eligible for the death penalty because of his age, but could spend the rest of his life in prison if convicted.

The criminal complaint alleges that the murders were committed "for the benefit of, at the direction of, and in association with a criminal street gang," and that Sosa personally and intentionally discharged a handgun.

Sosa, who is about 5 foot 3, sat hunched for much of the day staring down at the defense table, wearing a tan sports jacket that looked about a size too big. He did not testify in his own defense.

Hanisee, in her final argument, told the panel that of the three or four people who returned to the party "to get revenge" for the earlier argument, two have been identified, "and one of them is sitting right here in front of you."

Motioning to Sosa, she concluded by asking "that you hold him responsible for the deaths."