

## ***Idaho Man Convicted in 1984 Murder of 12-Year-Old Colorado Girl***

The long-unsolved kidnapping and killing of Jonelle Matthews haunted the community of Greeley, about 50 miles north of Denver.

**By Eduardo Medina**

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A Colorado jury on Monday convicted an Idaho man of murder and kidnapping in the 1984 disappearance and death of a 12-year-old girl who was killed days before Christmas, a case that went unsolved for decades and haunted the tight-knit community of Greeley, Colo., where she lived.

Hours after the man, Steven D. Pankey, 71, a former Greeley resident who made a long-shot bid for the Republican nomination for governor of Idaho in 2018, was found guilty of first-degree murder and second-degree kidnapping, Judge Timothy G. Kerns of District Court sentenced Mr. Pankey to life in prison with the possibility of parole after 20 years, The Greeley Tribune reported.

It was the second time that Mr. Pankey had been tried in connection with the killing of Jonelle Matthews; the first ended in a mistrial last year after a jury did not reach an agreement on most counts for Mr. Pankey, Denver 7 News, a TV station, reported.

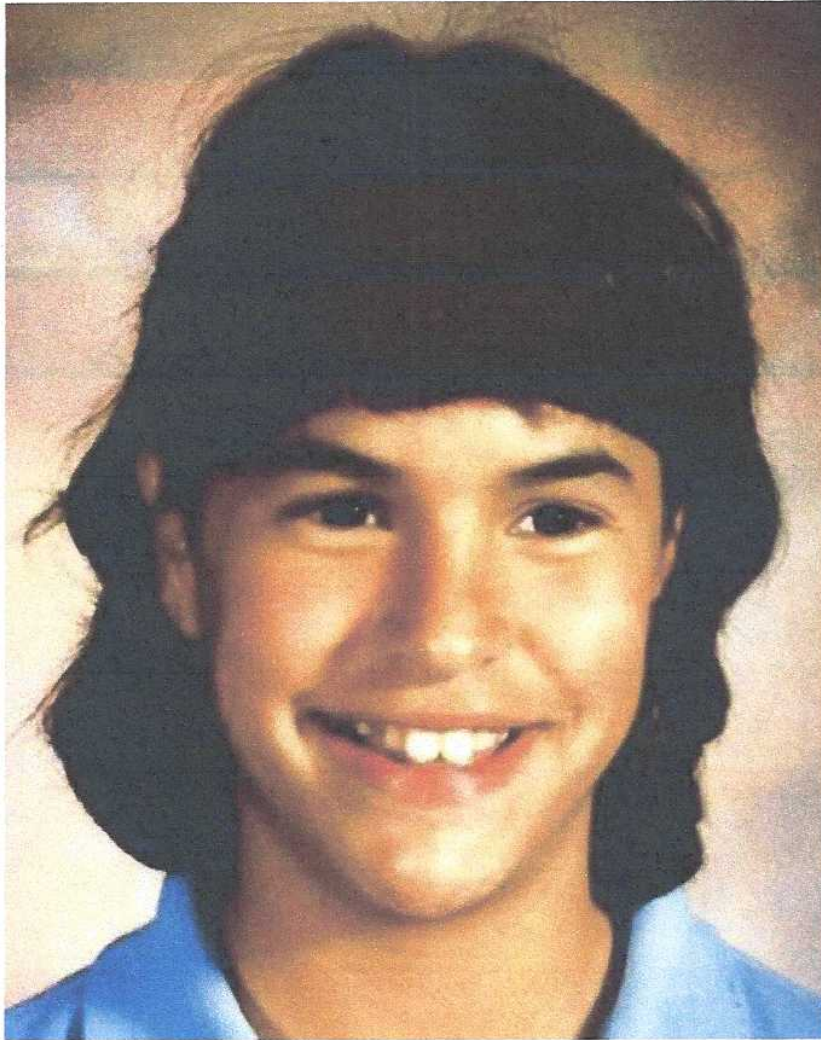
On Monday afternoon, after hearing the verdict, Jonelle's parents, Jim and Gloria Matthews, told reporters that they were grateful for the jury's decision.

"I just want to cry," Ms. Matthews said, holding a framed photograph of her smiling daughter. She added: "God is the only one who can forgive evil, and I feel that this is evil."

Mr. Matthews said that he felt "closure, finality for our family."

Mr. Pankey maintained his innocence. "I am a Christian," he said in court on Monday, according to 9 News in Denver, a TV station. "I will be in heaven. I am innocent. And this is not justice for Jonelle."

The verdict ended a nearly 40-year mystery in Greeley, where Jonelle's disappearance and death had hung over the city, which is about 50 miles north of Denver and has roughly 110,000 residents. The case had also garnered national attention after President Ronald Reagan mentioned her disappearance in remarks to reporters in 1985, imploring them to amplify stories of missing children.



The remains of 12-year-old Jonelle Matthews, who was kidnapped and killed in 1984, were discovered in 2019. Greeley Police Department

In 2019, Jonelle's remains were found in a field southeast of Greeley. Detectives determined that she had died from a single bullet wound in the upper-left portion of her skull. The local Police Department said in a statement in 2020, when Mr. Pankey was first indicted on first-degree murder and kidnapping charges, that "generations of Greeley police officers have never forgotten Jonelle." For decades, the Police Department said, officers lived "in torment over the possibilities of what may have occurred that grim evening."

On Dec. 20, 1984, according to a grand jury indictment, Mr. Pankey, armed with a gun, took Jonelle from her family's home and killed her during the course of the kidnapping.

Prosecutor argued that while there was no DNA evidence that implicated Mr. Pankey in the murder, his own statements and actions throughout the years made him the sole suspect.

A lawyer for Mr. Pankey said in his opening statement that there was no physical evidence linking Mr. Pankey to the crime, and that prosecutors were seeking "simple, uncritical justice."

Mr. Pankey had displayed an unusual interest in the case over the years, prosecutors said, and told people things that seemed to hint he had been involved.

Mr. Pankey also intentionally inserted himself in the investigation many times and claimed to have knowledge of the crime, prosecutors said. His claims, the indictment said, "grew inconsistent and incriminating over time."

Among the details he gave law enforcement personnel was that a rake had been used to cover up tracks in the snow the evening she was taken, according to the indictment. Mr. Pankey had watched children walk home from the middle school that Jonelle attended, it stated.

Mr. Pankey's ex-wife, Angela Hicks, testified that her husband, whom she described as a controlling and deeply religious man, had paid intense attention to the case immediately after Jonelle's disappearance. The family never read the paper or listened to the radio, but that December, he told her to turn on the radio and listened closely as the news played about Jonelle, she testified. He also used the little money they had to buy two newspapers and told his wife to read him the stories about Jonelle numerous times.

During a church service a few months after her disappearance, when a minister said that Jonelle would be found safe, Mr. Pankey muttered, "False prophet," Ms. Hicks told investigators.

After the verdict on Monday, Ms. Matthews, Jonelle's mother, said that her grief was still immense.

"I cannot forgive him," she said, "for how he killed Jonelle."

Eduardo Medina is a reporter covering breaking news. @byEduardoMedina