

Executive Department

State of California

PARDON

Craig Richard Coley

In the early morning hours of November 11, 1978, Rhonda Wicht was beaten and strangled to death in her apartment. Her 4-year-old son, Donald, was smothered and died of asphyxia in his bed. Craig Coley, a former boyfriend of Ms. Wicht, was arrested and charged with these heinous crimes. Mr. Coley was tried twice; the first trial resulted in a hung jury and he was convicted by the jury at his second trial. On February 26, 1980, the Ventura County Superior Court sentenced Mr. Coley to life without the possibility of parole for two counts of first degree murder with special circumstances. His conviction was affirmed on appeal and several petitions for habeas corpus failed.

Mr. Coley has been incarcerated for more than 38 years and he is now 70 years old. He petitioned for clemency on the basis of factual innocence. In September 2015, I requested the Board of Parole Hearings to conduct an investigation. During that investigation, a former police detective, police captain, and police officer reported that they believed Mr. Coley was wrongfully convicted and opined that the detective who originally investigated the matter mishandled the investigation or framed Mr. Coley. The Simi Valley Police Department and Ventura County District Attorney's Office subsequently initiated an investigation into the integrity of Mr. Coley's conviction and have recently concluded, based on their investigation and DNA testing, that Mr. Coley is innocent. Although the District Attorney's office originally opposed clemency, now the District Attorney and Chief of Police support Mr. Coley's petition for clemency. They write that they "no longer have confidence in the weight of the evidence used to convict Mr. Coley" and that the current evidence "would meet the legal standard for a finding of factual innocence."

Mr. Coley had no criminal history before being arrested for these crimes and he has been a model inmate for nearly four decades. In prison, he has avoided gangs and violence. Instead, he has dedicated himself to religion. The grace with which Mr. Coley has endured this lengthy and unjust incarceration is extraordinary.

I grant this pardon because Mr. Coley did not commit these crimes. I direct the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to immediately release Mr. Coley from prison. It is my hope that any and all individuals responsible for the murder of Rhonda and Donald Wicht are brought to justice.

THEREFORE, I, EDMUND G. BROWN JR., Governor of the State of California, by virtue of the power and authority vested in me by the Constitution and statutes of the State of California, do hereby grant to Craig Coley a full and unconditional pardon for the above offenses.



IN WITNESS WHEREOF I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Great Seal of the State of California to be affixed this 22nd Day of November, 2017.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edmund G. Brown Jr.", written over a horizontal line.

EDMUND G. BROWN JR.
Governor of California

ATTEST:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alex Padilla", written over a horizontal line.

ALEX PADILLA
Secretary of State