

Remarks: District Attorney Tony Rackauckas  
Press Conference: 05/16/05  
Re: Death Sentence in People v. Alejandro Avila

Today, the jury composed of 4 women and 8 men, before the Honorable William Froeberg, stated that the only just punishment for what Mr. Avila did is the ultimate punishment. Mr. Avila will receive the death penalty for kidnapping, sexually assaulting and murdering little five-year-old Samantha Runnion and for posing her lifeless body in the most demeaning way alongside the highway in dirt.

The law required me to restrain my comments regarding Alejandro Avila and what he did for three years. I think I can say more now. I have been a prosecutor, a judge and the elected District Attorney for more than 30 years and this is as horrific a crime as I have ever seen committed upon an individual – a little girl. This crime cannot be mitigated by any facts. Mr. Avila is simply the poster child for the death penalty.

The People of Orange County gave Mr. Avila more consideration for his life than Mr. Avila did for little Samantha. How can Mr. Avila care more about the correct pronunciation of his name during trial than the anguish and sorrow felt by Samantha's family? Finally, as I promised almost three years ago, justice is being done for Samantha and Alejandro Avila is being brought to justice.

For almost three years, many members of my office devoted countless hours for this little girl and what she stands for. Many of us carried her picture in our pockets and her smile in our hearts. She stood for love, talent, spirit, joy, bravery and everything good about this world.

Then Mr. Avila decided that fulfilling his sick, selfish perversion was worth more than all of that. By doing that, Avila so cruelly denied her so many things in life – riding a two wheeled bike, getting braces, getting a driver's license, going off to college, getting married, having a beautiful child of her own. He denied her mom being able to pick out a prom dress. He denied her new dad from getting to do the father-daughter dance at her wedding.

For that, Mr. Avila deserves the ultimate punishment. He no longer deserves to breathe our oxygen, feel the warmth of the sun or get a restful night of sleep.

Samantha believed in heroes – Hercules and Peter Pan. Unfortunately, we could not get there soon enough to save her, but heroes emerged in her spirit. First, there was her friend Sarah. The little girl, who had just turned six, helped the police get an accurate drawing of Avila and provided the first clues. Then Sheriff Carona, dubbed America's Sheriff by Larry King, our Sheriff. He led the massive manhunt that captured Avila. There was Tammy Drabek, who saw Mr. Avila's picture and came forward. There was Erin Runnion who gave all of us strength and inspiration. This verdict is also for the three Riverside girls who faced their fears and so bravely testified. Finally, Samantha

herself was a real hero who by fighting and not giving up provided the evidence to put away Mr. Avila, so he can never hurt another child.

I want to thank the jury for rejecting the ridiculous notion that law enforcement planted the DNA and for rejecting the nonsense that people do not have free will and somehow having a bad childhood is an excuse to commit a horrendous crime such as this. I have had survivors of abuse write to me about this and this is offensive to their struggle.

I want to acknowledge the men and women of the Orange County Sheriff's department and Sheriff Carona. I also want to acknowledge the professional men and women of the DA's office – my office. This case is a textbook example of how cases should be conducted.

Trials like these don't just happen. The members of this team were hand picked for their talent. I would like to acknowledge, Dave Brent who devoted his heart and soul to this case at my request. I am so proud of him. Deputy District Attorney Camille Hill who handled the DNA portion of the trial flawlessly, Deputy District Attorney Jim Mulgrew who handled the law and motions so expertly, Deputy District Attorney Susan Schroeder for handling the mountain of District Attorney inquiries from the press and the public, Investigators Rick Christensen and Alex Correa, Paralegals Barbara Penfield, Aurora De Los Reyes and Diren Tanaka for their job on the trial preparation, Rick Cromwell and Tori Bird for such tremendous help with graphics. There are many others I have not mentioned who deserve credit as well. This was a team working together in the most professional way.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen. Now I would like to turn the floor over to Sheriff Carona.