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## NEWS

### Five Gang Members Charged In Long Branch Murders, Robberies

By Matt Lynch

LONG BRANCH - Just days after facing public criticism from the head of the Greater Long Branch NAACP over a perceived lack of progress regarding a spate of local killings, authorities arrested and charged five suspected gang members in connection to a pair of unrelated shootings that left two city men dead and a third seriously wounded. The five arrested included two Long Branch residents: Qumere McClendon, 20, Seventh Ave and Paul Lewis, 18, Garfield Court. The two were arrested and charged last Friday with first-degree felony murder and first-degree armed robbery, among other charges, in connection to the Dec. 14 fatal shooting of Keith Mason, 28, at his Second Avenue residence. A third man, Darnell Stoval, 19, Lakewood faces identical charges in relation to Mason's death.

Just days later two men - Valdo A. Thompson, 21, Jackson and Carl Holdren, 18, Lakewood - were arrested and charged in connection to a Nov. 22 shooting at the corner of Johns Street and Hendrickson Avenue that left Michael Montgomery, 27, dead and a second Long Branch man seriously wounded. The second victim is recovering from his injuries and the prosecutor's office has asked that his name be withheld.

"These arrests were the direct result of the tireless efforts of dedicated law enforcement officers who worked diligently for two weeks to achieve justice at a time of year more traditionally spent at home with loved ones and family," said Long Branch Public Safety Director William A. Richards in a release after the Dec. 29 arrests of McClendon, Lewis and Stoval. "Together we are devoted to eradicating violent crime within the City of Long Branch."

All five men made their initial court appearance on Tuesday before Superior Court Judge Bette E. Uhrmacher in Freehold. Bail for the three defendants charged in the Mason killing was set at \$1.5 million.

Thompson, believed by officials to be a high-ranking member of the Bloods, had his bail set at \$2.5 million. Holdren's bail was set at \$1.5 million.

In all instances bail was set as cash only.

According to Monmouth County Prosecutor Luis A. Valentin, Mason's death revolved around an attempted robbery. The three men believed that Mason had marijuana in his home, he stated. During the course of the robbery Mason was shot once. His two-year-old son was present but physically unharmed according to Valentin.

"Our investigation revealed that Keith Mason was specifically targeted by these three men who sought to conduct an armed robbery of the victim, indifferent to the presence of the victim's two-year-old son," Valentin said in a statement. "This armed home invasion resulted in the senseless death of a young man."

According to a report in The Asbury Park Press last Wednesday, prosecutors took the additional step of announcing that they would request a hearing to determine the source of the bail money before any of the defendants are released. While Mason graduated from Long Branch High School, where he excelled at both football and wrestling, Montgomery had only recently moved to Long Branch. Like Mason, Montgomery died of a single gunshot wound, though eight shots were fired.

Local leaders including Lorenzo "Bill" Dangler, president of the Greater Long Branch NAACP, Councilman Brian Unger and Julia Wheeler, chairwoman of the Concerned Citizens Coalition held a joint press conference last week in response to the recent killings in the city. The year saw four homicides in Long Branch compared to none in 2005 and one in 2004. All four killings occurred in the last four months of the calendar year.

With the past week's events, three of the four incidents have seen arrests made in connection to the killings. Officials have yet to make any arrests connected to the Dec. 21 shooting of 21-year old Long Branch resident Patricia DaSilva.

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