

Bryant “Smoke” Lee pleads guilty

Yesterday, Bryant “Smoke” Lee pled guilty to two separate aggravated manslaughters and related weapons, hindering, and witness tampering charges, announced Union County First Assistant Prosecutor Albert Cernadas, Jr.

Lee DOB 9/11/1988 pled guilty for the November 12, 2007 fatal shooting of 13-year-old Elijah Henderson and the November 14, 2007 fatal shooting of homeowner Celso Pedra, said Assistant Prosecutor Bruce Holmes who prosecuted the case. He will be sentenced to 23 years in prison on April 20, 2012.

A Co-defendant in the case, Edariel “Riddic” Melendez, was previously tried, convicted and sentenced to approximately 90 years in prison for the deaths of Henderson and Pedra, said Holmes.

According to the investigation, Melendez shot Henderson as the teenager rode his bike on the 200 block of Fulton Street in the early morning hours of Nov. 12, 2007 with friends. Another teen was injured in the shooting and a third escaped without injury.

Two days later, Melendez, a member of the Crips street gang, shot Pedra, 54, of Fulton Street in Elizabeth.

In both cases, the deaths were a result of mistaken identity, prosecutors said. Melendez was seeking retaliation against rival gang members for the November 11, 2007 murder of Rahshad Thomas.

Thomas, a member of the Crips known as “Twin” was killed at Ella’s Lounge in Elizabeth following a dispute.

Melendez mistakenly believed that Henderson and Pedra were

rival gang members. That was not the case, said Holmes.

In connection with the same homicides, prosecutors also arrested and charged Lee.

Investigators determined that Lee received the .40 caliber gun used by Melendez in the murders and later sold it to another resident in Elizabeth.

Cernadas commended Elizabeth Detectives Thomas Dubeau, Paul Pasternak and Louchan Holmes and Union County Prosecutor's Office Detectives Michael Manochio and Patricia Gusmano for their roles in the investigation. Prosecutors are thankful to victim witness advocates Elaine O'Neil and Maria Esteves who were a very helpful in counseling the victims' family members.