

## LONG ISLAND / CRIME

# Alleged MS-13 street gang member heads to trial on attempted murder charges

Ronald Catalan, who federal prosecutors say is a onetime leader of the Brentwood clique, is one of the first among two dozen alleged members of MS-13 whose trials in 16 murders are pending in federal court in Central Islip.



Ronald Catalan is shown in this Suffolk County Police mug shot from July 15, 2009, along with the exterior of the court building in Central Islip on Jan. 26. Photo Credit: SCPD/Yvonne Albinowski

**By Robert E. Kessler**

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The opening statements in the federal trial of the man who prosecutors say led the Brentwood clique of MS-13 are expected Tuesday in the first of a series of trials that have made the alleged actions of the street gang on Long Island a national symbol of violence.

Ronald Catalan, 26, of Brentwood, is charged in federal court in Central Islip with the attempted murders of three members of rival gangs as part of a pattern of racketeering, as well as conspiracies to commit murder, racketeering and distribution of cocaine and marijuana. Other alleged crimes are assault and using a firearm during crimes of violence.

Catalan is one of the first of some two dozen members of MS-13 whose trials in a total of 16 murders are pending in the Central Islip court. Many of the other alleged MS-13 gang members face potential death penalties because of a series of slayings that made national headlines. The victims include two Brentwood High School teens, Nisa Mickens and Kayla Cuevas, who were killed in September 2016, and Justin Llivicura, Michael Lopez, Jorge Tigre and Jefferson Villalobos, who were found dead in a park in Central Islip in April 2017.

The alleged MS-13 crimes have drawn the repeated attention of both President Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who have vowed to stamp out the gang.

Catalan's attorney Peter Brill said in a statement that it is difficult for Catalan — who faces life in prison if convicted — to get a fair trial.

"Despite the unhelpful rhetoric coming from Washington," Brill said, "Mr. Catalan is on trial as an American citizen with the same constitutional rights that all citizens enjoy. He is entitled to a fair trial where the government will have to prove its charges beyond a reasonable doubt. If they are not able to do that, he will

walk out of the courthouse a free man, which is what we expect will happen.”

When Catalan was arrested in the case in July 2017, Eastern District prosecutors said he was the leader of the Brentwood MS-13 clique.

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John Marzulli, spokesman for Eastern District federal prosecutors, declined to comment.

The trials of MS-13 members accused of murder have not been definitively scheduled and require longer preparation, with federal prosecutors and defense attorneys submitting extensive paperwork about whether or not the government should seek the death penalty. The ultimate decision on whether to seek a death

sentence upon conviction is up to the U.S. Justice Department in Washington.

Catalan’s trial, however, should offer insight into the detailed operations of the gang.

Government witnesses include at least six cooperators who were either gang members or associates, according to sources.

Catalan, who goes by the gang nickname “Stranger,” has been an active member on Long Island for about a decade, according to court papers filed by federal prosecutors. After his arrival from California as a newcomer to the Brentwood Locos Salvatruchas, or BLS, clique, he rose to eventual leadership, the court papers say.

Catalan was born and raised in California and belonged to a different street gang, the Surenos, court papers say. His rise in MS-13 on Long Island was marked by violence, starting in June 2009, with a street shooting incident and a separate stabbing incident at Brentwood High School, the prosecutors said.

In the first alleged attempted murder in June 2009, Catalan and other new members of the Brentwood Locos Salvatruchas clique “armed themselves with handguns and drove through Brentwood, hunting for rival gang members to attack and kill in order to increase their standing and solidify their membership in the MS-13 gang,” prosecutors said in a news release.

Catalan and others came upon a group they believed to be members of the rival Bloods gang and opened fire.

One of the targets, who was not identified, was hit in the back and arm but survived, the prosecutors said.

The second and third alleged attempted murders occurred in North Bay Shore in October 2015.

Catalan and other MS-13 members were looking to retaliate against suspected members of the rival Latin Kings street gang for assaulting a fellow MS-13 member, prosecutors said.

They saw a group they believed were Latin Kings, “approached the group and fired multiple shots before running back to [their] car and fleeing the scene,” prosecutors said. Two of their unidentified victims were shot but survived.

The federal case is not Catalan's only brush with law enforcement.

In July 2009, Catalan and other members of MS-13 attacked "a group of African-Americans near Brentwood High School who they believed were members of a rival gang," stabbing three victims and causing serious head trauma to a fourth, according to court papers filed by Eastern District federal prosecutors John Durham and Paul Scotti.

Catalan was sentenced to five years in prison after being convicted of first-degree assault and gang assault in connection with that incident.

"Despite being sentenced to five years in prison, the defendant [Catalan] continued his membership in the MS-13 and, in fact, elevated his status in the gang after his release from prison," the prosecutors wrote in court papers in September.

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