

TikTok Meets the Menendez Brothers

THE LATEST SOCIAL-MEDIA REVISIONIST CAMPAIGN CASTS THE NOTORIOUS MURDERERS AS WRONGLY MALIGNED VICTIMS OF EXTREMELY BAD PARENTING

BY REBEKAH BRANDES



AFTER SUCCESSFULLY TROLLING the Trump campaign and rehabilitating **Britney Spears**, TikTok's social justice-minded kids are rallying around a surprising new crusade: to free the Menendez boys, the Beverly Hills brothers who have spent the past 31 years in prison for murdering their parents.

On August 20, 1989, **Erik and Lyle Menendez**, 18 and 21, walked into the den of the family's Beverly Hills mansion where Jose Menendez, a millionaire Hollywood executive, had settled in for a night of TV with his wife, Kitty. The brothers took turns shooting the couple, killing their father in his chair and chasing their mother until she slipped on her own blood and took a final blast to the face.

The brothers then dropped out of college and spent over half a million dollars of insurance money on cars, watches, private tennis lessons, and parties while the cops investigated the murders as a possible mob hit. The spree came to an end when Erik's psychologist's mistress went to police claiming Erik had confessed everything in a recorded session.

The brothers' massively covered trial was a pop culture milestone—one of the first to be televised, gavel to gavel, on CourtTV. Millions tuned in. **Leslie Abramson**, Erik's tiger-mom attorney, claimed in opening statements that Jose Menendez had been sexually assaulting his sons for years until they finally reached their breaking point—and then gunned down their long-suffering mother to “put her out of her misery.” Their first trial ended in a hung jury. The second, in 1996, sent both away for life.

In 1989, when sexual abuse defenses were still rare, the brother's tearful testimony was dismissed as a desperate legal tactic by a pair of greedy con men. But in recent years, a spate of made-for-TV movies and docudramas has revived interest in the case, and in a #MeToo environment, accusations of sexual abuse no longer seem so far-fetched.

After CourtTV posted online the entire trial on Father's Day weekend, two TikTok factions—true-crime fanatics and anti-sexual-abuse protesters—joined forces in support of Erik and Lyle, now 50 and 53. On Instagram, users like @projectmenendez organized a letter-writing campaign urging **Governor Newsom** to commute their sentences. A Change.org petition calling for an appeal has garnered almost 80,000 signatures.

According to journalist and long-time Menendez supporter **Robert Rand**, the brothers—now under quarantine in different sections of San Diego's R.J. Donovan Correctional Center—are aware of their newfound fans. Erik recently released a YouTube message responding to his young supporters' questions and good wishes.

While the brothers have exhausted all of their appeals, Rand claims to have uncovered a letter Lyle sent to a cousin prior to the murders detailing his father's abuse. New evidence like that may motivate the boys to file a writ of habeas corpus, which would allow a final chance to request their freedom. Overturning the case would be a long shot; still, having an army of implacable 20-year-olds take up your cause never hurts. “I would never diminish the ability of a movement to gain legal traction,” says celebrity criminal defender **Mark Geragos**. “I could see a statute being passed which retroactively allows someone to reraise the issue,” like the 2001 statute creating a habeas corpus claim for women convicted of murdering abusive partners.

Social media, with the celebrity buy-in of **Rihanna**, **Snoop Dogg**, and **Kim Kardashian**, played an outsized role in the commutation of convicted murderer **Cyntoia Brown's** life sentence in 2019. If a Gen-Z celeb or two takes up their cause, the Menendez brothers might stand a chance at playing tennis in Beverly Hills again. Says Geragos, “Times change. People start to recalibrate. The law moves, and I'm a big believer that movements can have an effect.” ■



WE THE JURY

Erik and Lyle Menendez during their 1996 murder trial (top) and in prison. An army of TikTokers is agitating to overturn their convictions.