



# Nuestra Familia

## News

### **Fremont, California drug dealer sentenced to 20 years**

Wireupdate.com

Tuesday, May 18th, 2010

By [Monica Lawrence](#)

SACRAMENTO – United States Attorney Benjamin B. Wagner announced that United States District Judge William B. Shubb sentenced Jose Villaseñor, 35, of Fremont, today to 20 years in federal prison to be followed by five years of supervised release for a large-scale cocaine, methamphetamine, and marijuana trafficking conspiracy. Villaseñor was convicted following a jury trial on November 12, 2009.

This case is the product of an extensive investigation by the FBI's Stockton Violent Crime Task Force, the San Joaquin County Metropolitan Narcotics Task Force (METRO), and the Stockton Police Department into the activities of the Mario DIAZ Drug Trafficking Organization (DIAZ DTO) that distributed large amounts of illegal controlled substances, including methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana, and ecstasy throughout the Eastern and Northern Districts of California with supply lines from Mexico and distribution channels reaching to other United States cities, including Warren, Ohio and Atlanta, Georgia. The DIAZ DTO operated under the umbrella of

NUESTRA FAMILIA (the NF), a violent Hispanic prison gang based within the California prison system whose members exert control over street-level Norteño gang members engaged in drug trafficking and violent crime.

This case was part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) effort. OCDETF was established in 1982 to conduct comprehensive, multilevel attacks on major drug trafficking and money laundering organizations. OCDETF's principal mission is to identify, disrupt, and dismantle the most serious drug trafficking and money laundering organizations and those primarily responsible for the nation's drug supply. Assistant United States Attorneys Jason Hitt and William S. Wong are prosecuting the case.

According to the evidence at trial, between August 25, 2005 and June 27, 2007, Villaseñor distributed more than six pounds of methamphetamine, more than 16 kilograms of cocaine, and delivered five pounds of marijuana to an apartment in Salinas. During the drug trafficking conspiracy, the defendant also sold a Mazda Millennium equipped with a hidden compartment that was designed to conceal large quantities of controlled substances and transport drug proceeds while avoiding law enforcement detection. The Mazda's hidden compartment was used by Mario Diaz, Gerardo Mora, Manuel Gauna, and others to transport a total of 16 kilograms of cocaine from Northern California to Ohio in September and October of 2006.

At trial, the United States also introduced 20 drug-related phone calls between Villaseñor and Mario DIAZ that were wiretapped by the FBI between March 22, 2007, and May 26, 2007. During the intercepted calls, the defendant discussed pound-quantities of methamphetamine, marijuana, and kilogram-quantities of cocaine.

In sentencing Villaseñor to 20 years in federal prison, United States District Judge William B. Shubb said that the defendant's attempt to portray himself at trial as a musician who was passionate about music was not accurate because the evidence showed that Mr. Villaseñor was more of "a drug dealer who dabbled in music." Judge Shubb noted that although Mr. Villaseñor had no prior criminal history, his large-scale drug trafficking between 2005 and 2007 required a sentence of 20 years in federal prison.

## **Musician sentenced to 20 years in prison in drug case**

### **One-time 'Valley Star' kingpin testified against co-defendant**

By JULIA REYNOLDS

Herald Salinas Bureau

Posted: 05/20/2010 01:30:26 AM PDT

A "narco-corrido" singer-songwriter indicted in a far-reaching investigation of the Nuestra Familia gang was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison Monday — days after his attorney said in court papers that Castroville resident Mario "Weasel" Diaz, once the top target of the FBI's Operation Valley Star, could be allowed to go free.

Musician Jose Angel Villaseñor was convicted in November of drug distribution charges after his co-defendant Diaz emerged as a cooperating witness and testified against him.

For the first time since the massive gang-and-drug case began in 2007, documents submitted last week for Villaseñor's sentencing offered a glimpse into the terms of a sealed plea agreement for Diaz, who once was the FBI's principle target.

Diaz and former Salinas resident Larry "Paqui" Amaro were singled out as the leaders of the "Mario Diaz Drug Trafficking Operation," run for the benefit of the Nuestra Familia. Diaz was caught on tape conducting numerous drug deals and said that for every pound of drugs sold, \$200 would be sent to Nuestra Familia "banks" in prison for the gang's leaders.

Long known to Monterey County gang investigators, Diaz faced life in prison when he was arrested in 2007. He quickly agreed to help the government.

A memorandum filed last week by Villaseñor's attorney, Dina Santos, notes that although the government and Diaz agreed to a minimum 20-year sentence, the deal allows for the possibility of far less time.

Santos said "loopholes" allow the court to further reduce Diaz's agreed-to minimum of 20 years if he helps in other cases.

"What the government continues to exclude here, as they did in (Villaseñor's) jury trial, is the agreement that Mr. Diaz can in fact receive a further reduction in his sentence for substantial cooperation in other criminal cases," Santos wrote to the court.

In past federal gang prosecutions, such as the 2000 Nuestra Familia case Operation Black Widow, witnesses who faced life in prison were sometimes released after "time served." In Black Widow, the top informant got less than five years.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jason Hitt, prosecutor for the Valley Star case, said the likelihood that Diaz would receive a further reduced sentence is "a fairly unlikely proposition."

"The agreement is clear that he can do no less than 20 years," Hitt said, unless Diaz provides "substantial cooperation" in additional cases. "The bottom line is we'll recommend 20." And that's only if Diaz continues to cooperate in the Valley Star trials, he said.

But, Hitt said, the language of the agreement "had to accommodate a future we couldn't anticipate at the time. If I had blocked him from having the potential for helping other cases, I would be cutting those off."

The federal judge in the case, he said, will have the last word.

Santos last week disputed Hitt's contention that Diaz will spend at least 20 years in prison and therefore Villaseñor, who did not cooperate, should get even more time.

"Mr. Diaz was a major drug dealer and gang leader of the Nuestra Familia gang, with a criminal history involving prior drug dealing," Santos wrote in response to the government. "Mr. Diaz's gang banging, drug dealing, and criminal history are incomparable to that of Mr. Villaseñor's complete lack of any criminal history, no gang affiliation, and minor role within this case."

Santos asked Judge William Shubb for a 10-year sentence for Villaseñor, while Hitt pushed for 30 years. Shubb settled on 20.

"It was a ridiculous amount of time for a case based on Mario Diaz's good word," Santos said, referring to Diaz's testimony in her client's trial last fall.

Villaseñor was allowed to be tried separately from the other defendants because there was no evidence he had gang ties, and Shubb prohibited any mention of gangs or Nuestra Familia in the court.

### **Sings of tragic tales**

At Villaseñor's trial, the defense portrayed him as a full-time musician from Fremont who sang popular ballads chronicling the tragic tales of narco-traffickers.

Hitt calls Villaseñor "a drug dealer who dabbled in music."

Villaseñor struggled in the competitive San Francisco Bay Area music scene, and his band, Los Fuereños de Durango, traveled to night clubs in a funky red bus. One of his songs tells the story of three women from Durango, Mexico, who drive a black Ford Taurus into the U.S., presumably to deliver drugs and bring money home. It laments the fate of a small village where the U.S. market for crystal meth has taken over the town's economy.

In trial, Diaz testified that he and Villaseñor bought and sold large amounts of drugs and that Villaseñor sold Diaz a customized car with an X-ray-proof compartment for hiding drugs — claims backed in part by recordings of wiretapped calls.

The jury took less than two hours to find Villaseñor guilty of conspiring to distribute methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana, and of using telephones to carry out the acts.

### **Pleads guilty**

Villaseñor was the first of the case's 26 defendants to face a jury. In a case already fraught with twists and turns, most of the defendants remain in custody as the government gears up for its main event, a group trial set to begin in September in Sacramento federal court.

After nearly three years of motions and hearings, Villaseñor is only the second defendant to receive a prison term. Last month, Salinas resident Manuel Gauna, 43, was sentenced to 20 years and 10 months after pleading guilty to narcotics charges. Gauna admitted he distributed drugs in Salinas, Los Banos and other cities; flew to Cleveland to supervise drug sales there; and brought cocaine from Los Angeles to Salinas.

After Villaseñor was allowed a separate trial, attorneys for Castroville resident Richard Mendoza recently asked that his case also be severed from the rest, saying the gang-infused nature of the main trials might prejudice a jury.

But Hitt countered with a report by Monterey County Gang Task Force member Deputy Brian Hoskins, stating that Mendoza is an admitted Norteño with a decade-long history of gang arrests and probation terms. Mendoza has assaulted rival Sureño gang members, Hoskins wrote, and has a number of gang tattoos, including a tiny artichoke near his left ear, indicating Mendoza is a Castroville Norteño.

Hoskins said he spent 30 hours observing Mendoza and saw him conduct "hand to hand narcotics sales at two different Castroville businesses and in association with other Norteño gang members."

Villaseñor's sentencing came less than two weeks after defense attorneys filed a motion to dismiss the entire Operation Valley Star case, charging outrageous government misconduct.

The defense alleges that another government witness, admitted Nuestra Familia member Charles "Peanut" Oak of Stockton, was the top suspect in a gang murder committed while he worked as an FBI informant.

Hitt said he is preparing a response, due to be filed in July, that will refute the defendants' claims.

## **Informant a killer, attorneys charge**

*Drug trafficking defense seeks to have case tossed*

By **Zachary K. Johnson**

The Stockton Record

May 11, 2010 12:00 AM

STOCKTON - Attorneys defending drug trafficking suspects in a sweeping federal case said investigators used a Stockton gang leader as an informant while he continued to distribute large amounts of methamphetamine and may have been involved in two Stockton murders, according to court documents.

The accusation of "outrageous government misconduct" was filed in court Friday in an attempt to dismiss a case stemming from the federal Operation Valley Star to take down bosses in Nuestra Familia, a prison gang atop the Norteño gang hierarchy.

"In this case, the government partnered with the leader and 'shot caller' of the Norteños gang in the Stockton area and let him run with impunity, purportedly to infiltrate and prosecute others involved in distributing controlled substances," according to documents submitted by John Balazs, an attorney for one of the defendants in the United States vs. Diaz case in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California.

Prosecutors had yet to file a response to the motion to dismiss but said it would be forthcoming.

"There's a big disconnect of what they accuse the FBI of doing and what actually happened," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Jason Hitt, who is prosecuting the case. Much of the defense's dismissal motion focuses on crimes for which the informant was prosecuted in San Joaquin County after the federal investigation had completed.

"They just mined the latter case and are trying to graft in on the timeline of our case," Hitt said. Operation Valley Star wrapped up in summer 2007. Nearly a year later, an operation conducted by state and local agencies, including the Stockton Police Department, targeted gang leadership and gang members in the Stockton area. It was known as Operation Monster.

The informant was arrested at the end of Operation Monster, according to federal court documents, in which he is identified as "CW-1."

He pleaded guilty to charges that he conspired to sell drugs and commit assault, and he was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Local court documents identify him as Charles Edwin Oak, 35, who goes by the nickname "Peanut."

Oak told an associate to "bash" and "slash" one person who was no longer in good standing with the gang in May 2008, according to a San Joaquin County grand jury indictment. Oak conspired to assault another Norteño, telling an associate to "cut him up, or put a hole in him," according to the indictment. That also was in 2008.

But the prosecution's informant was a leader and "shot caller" for the Norteños in Stockton in 2006 and 2007 while he also was providing information in Operation Valley Star, according to the defense motion filed Friday in federal court. The motion cites an affidavit prepared by a state agent about the investigation into the killing of John Escobar, who was gunned down in the 800 block of Morada Avenue on Oct. 16, 2006.

Stockton police interviewed the informant - Oak - after learning he had threatened Escobar with a drawn handgun before the shooting occurred, according to the affidavit.

The defense motion also noted the informant ordered the slashing of an inmate at Deuel Vocational Institution around January 2007 and may have been involved in the fatal shooting of 19-year-old Manuel Fajardo at a Stockton "sideshow" Feb. 4, 2007, according to court documents.

Hitt, the federal prosecutor, said there was little to support the parts in the defense motion asserting the informant's involvement in the two homicides and the inmate slashing.

He noted the information about the Escobar homicide was from a statement of probable cause, not a more-stringent criminal charge or courtroom conviction, and said no authorities were cited in the attempt to connect the informant to the Fajardo homicide.

## Misconduct alleged in gang case

### Defense says FBI overlooked informant's criminal acts

By JULIA REYNOLDS

Herald Salinas Bureau

Posted: 05/08/2010 01:29:43 AM PDT

Updated: 05/11/2010 09:53:47 AM PDT

Defense attorneys have accused the FBI of using an out-of-control informant inside the Nuestra Familia gang even after learning that the man participated in drug sales and assaults — and may have been the top suspect in a murder.

Attorneys on Friday filed a motion to dismiss a far-reaching case on grounds of outrageous government misconduct during Operation Valley Star, a federal investigation that in 2007 targeted dozens of Nuestra Familia members and associates from Monterey County and the Central Valley.

The motion, which includes exhibits still under seal, describes a slew of bloody assaults and murders involving informant Charles Edwin Oak during 2006 — the same year he wore a wire for federal and state agents trying to break up Nuestra Familia drug operations stretching from Salinas to the Central Valley.

The document states that Oak was the top suspect in the 2006 slaying of a Stockton man, but that authorities looked the other way.

"Inexplicably, even after learning of his involvement in at least one murder and continued drug dealing while acting as an informant, the U.S. Attorney's Office and federal agents did not shut (Oak) down and pursue prosecution of his criminal activities," the motion alleges. "Rather, (Oak) was allowed to continue to work as an informant, which provided him protection from law enforcement while he continued to engage in his criminal activities."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jason Hitt, who is prosecuting the case

in a Sacramento federal court, said he questioned the timeline of crimes described in the motion, but said his full response will be submitted at a court hearing in July.

"It's unclear as to how this would amount to outrageous misconduct," he said Friday.

### Informant arrested

The motion refers to the informant only as CW-1, but Oak's name became known to the public after he was arrested in 2008 by Stockton police in a local wiretap investigation called Operation Monster.

An admitted member of Nuestra Familia, Oak was known by the nickname "Peanut" and has been described as the kingpin of the gang's activities in Stockton.

The Herald previously reported the informant ordered assaults and other crimes in the months after he worked for the FBI, but this is the first information to surface suggesting he committed serious crimes while under the government's watch.

Oak helped the government make its case by wearing a recorder as drugs deals were allegedly arranged.

His targets were two men considered the state's top leaders for the gang's street operations: former Monterey County residents Mario Diaz and Larry Amaro.

On Aug. 1, 2006, Oak secretly taped his first meeting with Diaz in a hardware store parking lot in Stockton, according to earlier court records.

Sitting in the front seat of Oak's car, Diaz began to talk about the Nuestra Familia's activities, the records said, describing drug operations in Salinas, Sacramento, San Francisco, Oakland, Los Banos and Stockton.

Diaz's partner, the report said, was Amaro. According to an FBI document, Diaz and Amaro kept each other "informed of everything."

Diaz explained to Oak that for every pound of drugs sold, \$200 would be sent to Nuestra Familia "banks" in prison, benefiting the gang's leaders. The meeting ended with Diaz offering to deliver a half pound of methamphetamine to Oak.

Oak recorded the entire conversation, helping to kick off what became the largest operation targeting the Nuestra Familia's drug business until Operation Knockout's raids in Salinas last month.

### **Task force aware**

According to the motion to dismiss, a month after Oak recorded Diaz, a Norteño named Vincent Torres got in a fight with a fellow gang member in a Modesto park. Afterward, Oak asked Torres to meet him in a Stockton park, where he punched Torres until he was unconscious, the motion states. When Torres awoke, Oak tried to stab Torres with a broken beer bottle or a knife, according to the motion, which alleges that FBI task force members were aware of the assault as soon as it happened.

A few weeks later, Torres was arrested and sent to prison, where he was slashed by an inmate's razor. According to a Stockton police report, the attacker told Torres, "This is from Peanut," apparently referring to Oak.

Then, according to an affidavit by a state narcotics agent, around a month after the Torres assault, Stockton resident John Escobar was shot and killed. Detectives learned that Oak and Escobar had argued earlier in the day and that Oak pulled out a handgun and threatened Escobar.

Later that evening, Escobar was found shot to death. Before police interviewed Oak, agents working with the Valley Star task force met with Stockton detectives, according to the motion, and the agents told the officers Oak was their informant.

Detectives administered a polygraph examination. Oak denied killing Escobar, but the examiner said the results were inconclusive.

The motion notes "other court documents and reports" that describe Oak as the primary suspect in Escobar's homicide, but those documents were not available to the public Friday. He was never charged with Escobar's slaying.

"After the Escobar shooting, the FBI Task Force continued to use (Oak) as an informant in this case though officers believed he was responsible for the murder of Escobar," the motion states.

It is believed that Oak stopped working for the government around June 2007. Nearly a year later, Stockton police arrested him after their own wiretaps caught him ordering several assaults on rivals. Grand jury testimony in that case indicates Oak believed some of his intended victims were aware he worked as an informant.

He is currently serving a 10-year sentence in state prison.

### **Similar motion**

A similar motion to dismiss was filed eight years ago in Operation Black Widow, at the time the federal government's largest conspiracy case against the Nuestra Familia. In 2002, defense attorneys showed that a government informant secretly sold methamphetamine and failed to stop — and perhaps even authorized — a 2001 gang slaying at Cap's Saloon in Salinas.

Although that motion was unsuccessful, court watchers say the informant's behavior helped the defendants negotiate more lenient sentences for several top gang captains.

One of those, Albert "Bird" Larez of Salinas, is scheduled to be released later this year.

### **Gang member gets 8 years in drug case**

By JULIA REYNOLDS

Herald Staff Writer

Posted: 05/08/2010 01:29:51 AM PDT

Updated: 05/08/2010 01:29:53 AM PDT

One Salinas gang member originally targeted by Operation Valley Star has been

sentenced in another case after a vehicle chase ended in a small ice storm of powdered methamphetamine.

Danny San Nicolas, a Norteño gang member who was close to Salinas' one-time Nuestra Familia kingpin Robert "Bubba" Hanrahan, was sentenced April 29 to just over eight years in federal prison in the San Francisco courtroom of Judge Charles Breyer.

San Nicolas pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to distribute methamphetamine and two counts of possession of the drug for sale.

FBI agents at one time sought an arrest warrant for San Nicolas along with dozens of other Norteño and Nuestra Familia gang associates as part of the 2007 case Operation Valley Star. For unclear reasons, the warrant was not issued.

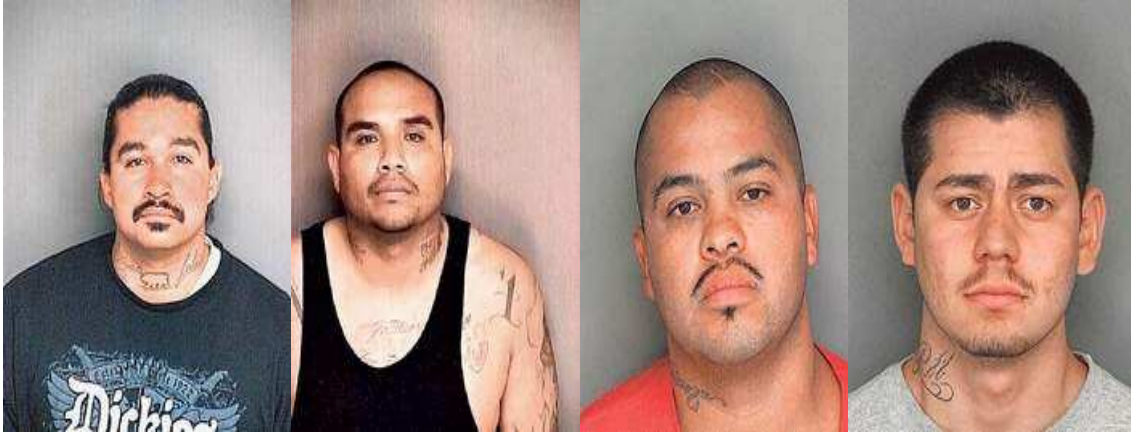
But on Aug. 7, 2009, San Nicolas and co-defendant Robert Baker were driving around 2 a.m. on Highway 101 near San Rafael in a vehicle with no license plate that was drifting out its lane, according to a now-unsealed complaint in the case.

A California Highway Patrol cruiser tried to stop the vehicle, which eventually came to a stop beside the freeway. Just as officers ordered the men out, the car sped away again, hitting speeds of 100 mph.

Suddenly, the officers in pursuit saw a large bag tossed out the car window and the CHP car was splattered with "a white, powdery substance."

Apparently, one of the men had tried to rip open the bag and scatter its contents, but it blew out of his hands before he finished.

The car eventually stopped and San Nicolas and Baker were arrested after a brief foot chase. Detectives found enough drug residue scattered inside the car to charge them with intent to distribute methamphetamine.



Jesus Coto

Bill Auyon

Ivan Morales

Eric Amaro

## Monterey County charges Northern Riders as a gang for the first time in state

### Gang officer: Filing is first of its kind in state

**The Californian - May 7, 2010**

In a first for California, five Monterey County men are facing criminal charges that they committed a crime to benefit the Northern Riders — a rapidly growing Norteño dropout group, a gang officer revealed this week.

The men are facing charges stemming from a Dec. 5 assault against one of their own at the Monterey County Jail.

The men, Jesus Cota, Billy Auyon, Ramiro Rodriguez, Ivan Morales and Eric Amaro, are accused of carrying out the crime to further their gang's influence in communities.

Officials said they could not release a mug shot of Ramiro Rodriguez because he has been out on bail for more than 30 days.

On Wednesday, Monterey County Superior Court Judge Russell D. Scott ruled that four of the members were to proceed to trial following the two-day preliminary hearing — in which a judge decides whether enough evidence exists for a case to move forward. Morales' hearing was delayed because his lawyer had prior court commitments.

At the center of the case is an ex-Northern Rider, identified in court records as "John Doe," who testified Tuesday against the defendants. The former gang member's identity is being withheld because of the sensitivity of the case.

Jesse Piñon, a county gang task force officer, said the case is unique because this group has not seen prosecution as a criminal street gang in California. Never before, Piñon said, has law enforcement been able to get a witness such as Doe to testify against the gang. He said the case is important because it could lead to prosecutions in other counties seeing growth in Northern Riders gang membership.

A May 2008 FBI classified report said the Northern Riders were one of two groups of former Norteño gang members posing an increasing threat on the streets of Monterey, Santa Clara, San Francisco, Sacramento and Mendocino counties. Their enemies are active members of both the Norteño and Sureño gangs.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation classified the Northern Riders as a "disruptive group" instead of a prison gang. According to prison guidelines, a "disruptive group" consists of inmates who pose a threat to the physical safety of other inmates or prison staff members because of their activities.

### **Prison gang or not?**

Gang experts have not completed a full investigation to determine whether the Northern Riders qualify as a prison gang. A thorough investigation is needed, gang experts say, to determine whether the group has grown into a prison gang. They usually look for rank structure in the group, tattoos, colors and whether the group started in prison. Once they have the report, it is sent to Sacramento, where it is determined whether a disruptive group is a prison gang.

Piñon, the prosecution's expert witness, testified Wednesday that the ultimate goal of this criminal street gang is to protect its participants from active Norteño gang members. Because Northern Riders members were dropouts, he said, they face a chance of retaliation from their former gangs. Norteños and Sureños, which mean "northerners" and "southerners" in Spanish, are the two major rival gang groupings in the Salinas area. Nuestra Familia leaders in prison direct Norteño gang activity at the street level, while Sureños answer to the Mexican Mafia, also a prison gang.

Piñon said he has seen intercepted messages between incarcerated Northern Riders gang members touting their aspirations to further themselves as a criminal street gang. He said it is also through these messages that all five defendants were recognized as Northern Riders.

According to testimony in this week's hearing, the Northern Riders were formed in 2001 at the High Desert State Prison in Susanville by Nuestra Familia gang members unhappy with their gang's structure. The Northern Riders are based on a democratic structure with a "council" that carries out the desires of its members.

## **Infiltration a goal**

Doe testified Tuesday that he was on the Salinas council and was charged with recruiting and expanding the Northern Riders before his arrest on a charge of possessing methamphetamine in July.

Part of the Northern Riders' mission, he said, is to recruit not only other Norteño dropouts, but to infiltrate the rival gang and influence its members to turn.

Doe told the judge that he joined the Northern Riders because he was tired of the politics within the Norteño structure. He became a Northern Rider in 2005 while serving at California State Prison, Corcoran. As a Northern Rider, he said, he ran drugs in areas including Richmond, Madera and the Bay Area.

Doe described the history of the Northern Riders, its mission and the fallout on Dec. 5 with his fellow gang members at the Monterey County Jail that led to his departure.

He testified that his exit was due to a disagreement he had with Cota over another Northern Rider. Because of this, Doe testified, he no longer wanted to be a part of the Northern Riders. He said Cota struck him after he expressed that he wanted out of the gang. The former gang member said all five defendants attacked him, wounding his back, neck, face and head. He said Rodriguez later told him he would be killed if he left the gang.

## **More prison time if convicted**

The county District Attorney's Office charged all five defendants with assault by means likely to produce great bodily injury in the Dec. 5 beating. They also face a gang enhancement of committing the offense to benefit the Northern Riders criminal street gang.

Prosecutor James Panetta said each defendant faces a maximum of four years in prison in the assault. If convicted of the gang enhancement, the defendants each face a maximum of an additional four years in prison.

According to court records, Cota, Auyon and Rodriguez also have prior convictions. Rodriguez is additionally charged with making threats to commit a crime resulting in death or great bodily injury to John Doe.

The case comes at an important time for the county's anti-gang officers, who say the Northern Riders' threat is increasing as Norteño gang members drop out in large numbers.

Piñon, who's assigned to the FBI's Safe Streets task force, said the group has grown at least four-fold in the past two years and can be seen especially at county jail.

Piñon said the Northern Riders try to recruit as many individuals as they can into their gang to help them gain control of drug territory of the Norteño and Sureño street gangs.

"The Northern Riders ultimately want to get out on the streets, commit crimes — they want to sell drugs and basically infiltrate the Nuestra Familia," he testified. "They want to cause chaos within the Nuestra Familia .... They want to recruit from these people and make their gang stronger."

## **FBI has long targeted Nuestra Familia leaders**

By JULIA REYNOLDS  
Herald Salinas Bureau

Posted: 04/23/2010 05:33:39 AM PDT

Updated: 04/23/2010 08:39:41 AM PDT

Thursday's Operation Knockout wasn't the first time the Nuestra Familia gang has been the target of law enforcement.

A decade ago, the FBI's Operation Black Widow targeted the gang's top leaders in Pelican Bay State Prison, as well as its out-of-prison regiment commanders for Salinas and other agricultural communities in Northern California, where the gang controls most of the drug-dealing activity.

The four-year Black Widow racketeering trial ended with the gang's highest leaders sent to a federal supermax prison in Colorado. Other convicted shot-callers were scattered throughout the federal prison system and away from their power base in California.

In 2007, arrests and indictments rolled in for Operation Valley Star, which focused on street-level drug operations allegedly conducted by those still loyal to the gang's old leaders. More than half of the 26 people arrested were from the Central Coast, although the bulk of the investigation was based in Central Valley farm towns.

Gang investigators believe the Salinas-area Nuestra Familia members in that case, including former Castroville resident Mario Diaz and Salinas resident Larry Amaro, were old-schoolers still loyal to the gang's generals now housed in the maximum-security prison in Florence, Colo.

Power struggles to fill local leadership positions in the wake of those mass arrests are believed by law enforcement officials to be at the root of some of the violence in Salinas.

Today, gang members and investigators say the most powerful of the two factions is loyal to the new leaders in Pelican Bay State Prison, which, according to the gang's constitution, is still Nuestra Familia's only official "headquarters."

From his maximum-security prison cell, gang general David "DC" Cervantes serves as the top leader, although investigators believe former Salinas resident Matt Rocha could be vying for the job.

Gang investigators believe Rocha, who is housed in Pelican Bay, is trying to become the next "General of the Pintas," the leader who commands all Nuestra Familia operations inside California prisons.

Rocha, whose family in Salinas has a well-documented history of involvement with Nuestra Familia, is believed to have stayed in control of Nuestra Familia regiments in Salinas and Monterey County through relatives in the area.

## **Your Town: Drug trafficker from Salinas gets almost 22 years**

The Monterey County Herald

Posted: 04/20/2010 01:58:52 AM PDT

Updated: 04/20/2010 09:13:42 AM PDT

### **SALINAS**

#### **Trafficker gets almost 22 years**

A Salinas man accused of drug trafficking on behalf of the Nuestra Familia gang was sentenced to nearly 22 years in prison by a Sacramento federal court Monday.

Manuel Gauna, 43, admitted in January he distributed drugs in Salinas, Los Banos and other cities. In a guilty plea statement, Gauna said he also flew to Cleveland to supervise drug sales there, and brought cocaine from Los Angeles to Salinas.

U.S. District Judge William B. Shubb handed down the sentence of 21 years and 10 months in federal prison. Gauna is the first to be sentenced among 26 people arrested during the long-running Operation Valley Star conducted by the FBI and other agencies. Another defendant, "narco-corrido" musician

Jose Angel Villasenor, was found guilty in a separate trial but has not been sentenced.

## Ione cops search for ways to stop growing gang issues

**Ledger Dispatch**  
**Thursday, April 08, 2010**

By [Scott Thomas Anderson](#)

"The Nortenos have a presence in this city," an Ione police officer told concerned students and parents Tuesday. "We're seeing gang trends develop as we speak."

The statement came just hours before the same officer confronted a student from Ione Junior High School for wearing blatant gang colors at school. According to the Ione PD, two schools within the city have recently seen fights and confrontations triggered by gang associations.

On April 6, Ione Police Sergeant Rocky Harpham, along with two of his officers, held a meeting at Mountain Oaks School to answer questions about the Nortenos' growing influence from Jackson to Ione. The evening was part of a broader mission by the Ione Police Department - as well as other Amador County law enforcement agencies - to combat the problem by educating students and parents about the reality of what Amador cops are now dealing with.



Video footage from the Jackson Rancheria Casino shows that actual shooting taking place, with the shooter stretching his arm out to fire at victims just feet away.

Fears over gang activity have risen steadily in 2010 due to a street terrorism case in Jackson and a number of assaults in Sutter Creek and Ione. Alleged home-grown members of the Nortenos have been implicated in all of these crimes.

On March 14, a group of known Nortenos from Stockton strolled into the Jackson Rancheria Casino and, according to Amador County Sheriff's detectives, shot two teenagers from a rival gang. One was shot in the neck and the other in the face.

In the wake of the shooting, Amador County Sheriff Martin Ryan and his gang intelligence officer met with the Amador County Unified School District to discuss awareness, including what types of gang clothing teachers and faculty should report to law enforcement.

Gang attire was on full display during several recent arrests by the Ione Police Department, including a vicious Nortenos beating on the Preston Avenue bridge, and the capture of a Norteno wanted for assault with a deadly weapon in Sacramento County. According to Ione Police Chief Michael Johnson, gang colors also helped instigate a confrontation at Mountain Oaks School, prompting his department to address the issue Tuesday night.

"There are some types of clothing that you'll see around Ione that stand for Norteno or Sureno," said Jason Peppas, Ione PDs gang intelligence officer. "We do have some Surenos living in Jackson and Ione, but the biggest trend we've seen lately is a spreading of the Nortenos, which includes young Caucasians in the area, most commonly between the ages of 15 to 20."

Peppas took the gathering of students and parents through both gangs' history in California. He cautioned the parents to look out for specific clothing brands and preferences, as well as developments like falling grades, defensive posturing on behalf of friends, signs and symbols in online communication and sudden anti-social behavior.

"One of the most important aspects of this is parental involvement," officer Polly Pent told the mothers present. "You have to ask the hard questions about the individuals your kids are spending time with. A lot of times when we, as police officers, warn a parent about someone their child is associating with, the first thing we hear is, 'but he seems so nice.' Then a few weeks later that same individual is getting arrested."

Speaking to juveniles at risk of becoming gang members, as well as their parents, factors into a proactive stance the Ione PD and other law enforcement agencies in Amador County are now taking before the Nortenos expand their foothold.

On Tuesday night, at least one Mountain Oaks student expressed grave concerns to the officers about what he has been seeing around the city. "I want all of this to stop," the teenager said. "I'm worried to let my little sister walk around because of this. I'm worried for her safety."

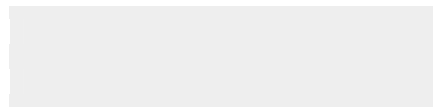
Norteno gang members are known to be muscle on the streets for the notorious Nuestra Familia prison gang.

## **County rocked by gang shooting at Rancheria, arrests made**

**Ledger Dispatch**

**Sunday, March 14, 2010**

By [Scott Thomas Anderson](#) - Bill Lavallie



The impact of gangs operating in Amador County took a sudden and shocking turn at 5 a.m. yesterday morning, when a confrontation at the Jackson Rancheria Casino led to one teenager getting shot in the neck and another getting shot in the face.

The Amador County Sheriff's Office learned of the gun play almost immediately after it happened. Deputies rushed to the scene and discovered two young, Hispanic men bleeding amidst the slot machines and lights. Each had been hit with pistol fire at close range.

Law enforcement officers from around Amador converged on the Rancheria to quickly set up a perimeter. The entire gaming facility was then evacuated as the sheriff's SWAT cleared the parking structure. The heavily-armed team members, along with deputies and detectives, began searching every vehicle on the grounds. They carefully combed the area where witnesses had observed the shooter and connected suspects fleeing.

Eventually, four suspects were netted between two parked cars. As the cuffs were being slapped on those individuals, a bystander reported seeing two suspicious males coming out of the brushy, wooded area near Dalton Road. A California Highway Patrol officer was in position to apprehend them while sheriff's deputies raced to the scene.

Using surveillance video of the actual shooting, detectives confirmed that one of the two suspects coming out of the brush was the trigger man. That shooter, 19-year-old Gilbert Zaragoza, has now been identified by authorities. Sheriff's personnel have also located Zaragoza's gun, a 22. caliber revolver.

Amador County Undersheriff Jim Wegner stated that all parties involved in the confrontation were from Stockton and had known associations with the violent street gangs the Nortenos, and the Surenos. The groups are deadly rivals in California's gang culture. It's still unclear which side fired during the clash. Since December, the Ione Police Department and the Jackson Police Department have both arrested alleged members the Nortenos for various felonies - all individuals who live in Amador County.

The two victims in today shooting were medi-flighted to trauma centers in the Central Valley. They are reportedly in stable condition. The alleged shooter is being held at Amador County Jail for attempted murder without bail.

Having worked all day at the crime scene, Wegner told the Ledger Dispatch that he appreciated assistance on the perimeter from the CHP, Jackson PD and Sutter Creek PD. He also praised the Rancheria's security officers for their efforts. "Their security did a really good job of helping us,"



Gilbert Zaragoza, 19, alleged gunman

the undersheriff said late Sunday afternoon. "They got surveillance images to us right away and provided important information to help our detectives make this arrest."

## Salinas man pleads guilty to crimes connected to Nuestra Familia gang

BY SUNITA VIJAYAN • SVIJAYAN@THECALIFORNIAN.COM • JANUARY 20, 2010

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A Salinas man pleaded guilty last week to charges of conspiring to sell drugs with Nuestra Familia gang members and their associates.

Manuel Gauna's plea, reflected in federal court papers filed Jan. 13 in Sacramento, comes two years following a 15-city gang sweep headed by the FBI.

Jeffrey Lewis Staniels, a federal public defender and one of Gauna's attorneys, said Tuesday that his client entered the guilty plea but has not cooperated with the government in the case.

"Admission to a part in conspiracy doesn't [mean admitting] involvement with everybody or every aspect of the conspiracy," Staniels said.

Gauna, 41, was among about two dozen suspected gang members arrested in the summer of 2007 as part of a sweep called "Operation Valley Star," which netted individuals throughout Northern and Central California. Authorities have said the raid in 2007 was part of a three-year investigation focusing on the Mario Diaz drug-trafficking organization.

Diaz, a former Castroville resident and identified by authorities as a heavyweight within the prison gang's drug operations, and Gauna were arrested in late May 2007 in Los Banos and federally indicted.

Federal prosecutors charged each suspect arrested in the operation with conspiracy to possess and distribute drugs including cocaine, methamphetamine and marijuana.

Authorities accused the organization of distributing drugs in Northern California through the Nuestra Familia, Nuestra Raza, Northern Structure and Norteño gangs.

Documents filed in federal court say Gauna helped transport and distribute the drugs, at Diaz's direction. According to the documents, Gauna's relationship with Diaz dated as far back as 2004.

## **Monterey County slayings called gang payback**

By JULIA REYNOLDS - Monterey County Herald

Posted: 01/23/2010 01:30:42 AM PST

Law enforcement authorities say a number of targeted killings in Monterey County during the past year are the result of gang orders to cleanse the area of those considered traitors by Norteños and their parent gang, the Nuestra Familia.

Recent slayings of at least seven people not in good standing with the gang in Greenfield and Salinas led investigators to conclude that a "cleanup" of the streets in the wake of two large federal racketeering cases is continuing.

"We're dealing with violence that is spread across the Salinas Valley and beyond," Greenfield Police Chief Joe Grebmeier said. "The issues are not in any one city and the solutions will have to involve the region."

Gang members, agents and federal prosecutors -- all of whom asked not to be named -- say the FBI is working a new gang conspiracy case in the Salinas Valley. Only San Francisco U.S. Attorney Joseph Russoniello said on the record that the FBI and his office are investigating more gang crimes in Monterey County.

The brazenness of some slayings remind longtime gang cops of a bloody era more than a decade ago, when gang leaders in Salinas and points south ordered dozens of killings in a civil war and power struggle within the gang.

In late 1998, several regiment leaders and so-called traitors were slain, with attempts made on many more as Nuestra Familia crew bosses fought over control of the valley.

The slayings of three people in and near the Pueblo Inn motel in Greenfield in December and January point to the possible involvement of a higher "shot caller" presumably still at large, investigators said.

Israel Cota of Soledad, who police say is a Nuestra Familia boss for Salinas Valley, is wanted on warrant by state parole officers. Police declined to say if he is a person of interest in the Greenfield slayings.

Police continue to try to apprehend 18-year-old Francisco Tamayo, believed to be the shooter of two women at the motel, but investigators do not consider him to be the gang authority who ordered the crime.

Yliza Martinez and Veronica Gallegos, both 30, were shot in their motel room Dec. 5. Gallegos died that night, Martinez died a week later.

Shortly after the slayings, fire crews were summoned to put out a mysterious fire in the motel's hallway.

Although police have not speculated on a suspect or motive behind the apparent arson, gangs for years have used arson and fire bombings as warnings to tell would-be crime witnesses not to cooperate with police.

On Jan. 14, Gallegos' half-brother Angel Gutierrez, 40, was shot and killed not far from the motel.

About that time, officers learned Cota failed to show up for a parole appointment. Cota was released from Monterey County jail in late December.

Citing an ongoing investigation, police declined to say whether they are aware of a specific motive for the three slayings, although Gutierrez was known to have had a falling out with Nuestra Familia years ago. Before that, he was "very active" with the gang in Soledad, an investigator familiar with his history said.

Some killings likely ordered

Salinas police detective Lalo Villegas said that just because a gang member is on a hit list doesn't necessarily mean his killing was ordered by the gang.

"Norteños can be on a hit list forever and nothing ever happens to them," he said.

Nonetheless, in the past year, he said, "we've also seen some of the true hits."

Gang officers from Monterey, Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties say current levels of violence are in part the unforeseen consequences of large federal prosecutions.

A leadership struggle at the gang's highest level emerged after the FBI's Operation Black Widow took out the Nuestra Familia's top captains and generals and sent them to a federal supermax prison in Colorado in 2005. Since then, it has been well-documented that two factions in the Central Coast have struggled over control of the gang: Those still loyal to the leaders in federal prisons, and those loyal to the new general, D.C. Cervantes of Chino, in Pelican Bay State Prison, the gang's traditional headquarters.

During the past year, investigators say, the Pelican Bay faction has asserted its authority after the government's Operation Valley Star in 2007 swept up key figures in the Salinas and Central valleys still reporting to the old leaders.

A second likely factor in the violence is competition from rival Sureño gangs.

The bloodshed has stepped up in part, police say, because the Nuestra Familia is trying to re-establish territory lost to its archenemy during the Nuestra Familia's recent years of organizational chaos.

"Sureños are definitely getting more organized," said Villegas. "We do know that we've been having some high-ranking people trying to unite them. They're starting to be a little more structured than we've seen before."

Villegas said the Salinas Valley is seeing Sureños targeting suspected traitors within their ranks, although he said he hasn't seen evidence the killings were ordered by higher-ups.

Links to '98 homicide?

One curious aspect of the investigations is that police are looking into whether at least two of the past year's victims may have known something about the slaying 12 years ago of Nuestra Familia's Salinas crew leader Miguel "Mikeo" Castillo by Rico "Smiley" Garcia, a case that made dramatic headlines at the time.

In 1998, Alberto Arizpe contacted police in an apparent attempt to mislead officers shortly after Castillo's killing, according to a police report.

He told skeptical detectives that Castillo's attackers were three Sureños -- members of the Norteños' rival gang. But Garcia later admitted to conspiring to kill Castillo and is serving a life sentence in a federal prison in Florida.

Arizpe eventually left the gang after he was assaulted and beaten by Norteño gang members in Monterey County Jail.

Last summer, he was 28 years old when he was killed along with a female friend in a brazen home-invasion attack on a Salinas residence.

Authorities are looking into whether last week's slaying victim, Gutierrez, was connected to Castillo's murder.

Suspect not believed to be gunman

The only person charged in the Pueblo Inn killings is a 15-year-old boy held in Juvenile Hall. Prosecutors say he was not the triggerman in the slayings of the two women, but was present when they were killed.

On Wednesday, a county court is expected to decide if the boy will be tried as an adult on two counts of murder.



Freddie "Danger" Guzman



Anthony "Tigre" Rubalcava

## **Watsonville man suspected in 2005 prison-ordered gang hit**

### **Santa Cruz Sentinel**

[By Jennifer Squires](#)

Posted: 09/04/2009 01:30:37 AM PDT

WATSONVILLE -- An alleged prison-gang hit man suspected in the attempted murder of a fellow Norteno gang member four years ago has been arrested by Watsonville police.

Freddie "Danger" Guzman drove the car Sept. 17, 2005 while his accomplice Anthony "Tigre" Rubalcava shot Mark Escobedo in the chest and left him for dead on the side of Highway 152, according to authorities.

But Escobedo, who investigators say was not in good standing with the gang and was marked for murder by Nuestra Familia prison gang leaders, didn't die.

Instead, he helped investigators identify his would-be killers.

Earlier this summer, Rubalcava was arrested, charged and found guilty of gang-motivated attempted murder in Santa Clara County. The 33-year-old was sent to state prison for 55 years to life.

Tuesday, a warrant was issued for Guzman, who was arrested during a traffic stop Wednesday on Arlene Drive, Watsonville police reported. He faces the same sentence, if convicted.

Police said the attempt on Escobedo's life can be traced to Nuestra Familia leaders in prison. Both Rubalcava and Guzman, now 31, served prison sentences before the attack on Escobedo.

Watsonville police Sgt. Saul Gonzalez said the two suspected hit men connected in prison and rose within the Norteno organization. They had marching orders when they were released from prison, Gonzalez said.

One of their instructions, allegedly, was to murder Escobedo.

"It's very hard to trace it back to who actually ordered it," Gonzalez said. "We have a lot of incidents where gang members are assaulted by their own gang for discipline, but some of them can be as minor as being jumped or hit across the face. ... This one seemed like they were trying to kill him."

The three men were not in the same gang subset, but all were players within the Norteno scene in Watsonville and knew each other, according to Gonzalez.

The night Rubalcava and Guzman are thought to have targeted Escobedo, they allegedly told him to drive over Mount Madonna with them to Gilroy to collect money from drug sales. Gonzalez said revenue from narcotics trafficking is taxed by Nortenos and funneled to Nuestra Familia officials in prison.

The trio didn't make it to Gilroy.

Just across the Santa Cruz-Santa Clara county line, Guzman, the driver, pulled off the road, police said. Rubalcava then shot Escobedo in the chest -- he was later convicted of that crime by a jury -- and the two alleged hit men fled.

A passing motorist noticed Escobedo bleeding on the side of the road and called 911, according to investigators, who credit the fast-responding ambulance to Escobedo's survival.

"When they left I think they assumed he was dead," Gonzalez said.

After the shooting, Escobedo, now 29, distanced himself from his gang, police said. Eventually, detectives from Watsonville police and the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office and District Attorney's Office put the pieces together.

Escobedo testified against Rubalcava this summer and said Guzman drove the car, police said.

It's still unclear why led gang leaders might have ordered the hit.

"Sometimes it can just be on a belief, a rumor," Gonzalez said, explaining that many of the city's unsolved beatings, stabbings and shootings are likely

tied to gang-ordered punishment. "A lot of the stuff, when victims don't cooperate, it is internal conflict."

## **Norteno injunction may get trial date**

By Brian Hamlin Contra Costa Times  
Posted: 09/05/2009 01:00:58 AM PDT

A trial date may be scheduled next month to determine if a temporary injunction against the Nortenos gang in Fairfield should become permanent.

The preliminary injunction, approved in July by Solano County Superior Court Judge David Edwin Power, prohibits gatherings of Norteno gang members and gang-related activities, within a 4.2-square-mile safety zone in central Fairfield, roughly bounded by Interstate 80, Air Base Parkway, Sunset Avenue and Highway 12. It also sets a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew for gang members.

During a brief hearing on the preliminary injunction Friday morning, Judge Power set 8:30 a.m. Oct. 23 for a case management conference in the matter and urged the District Attorney's Office to make sure all suspected Nortenos who had been served with notification of the injunction are notified of the hearing. At that time, a trial date also may be scheduled.

Fairfield police reported that the Nortenos were singled out for the injunction because they are believed to be one of the largest and most violent gangs operating in the Fairfield area. Members, the injunction claims, have been responsible for everything from graffiti to murder in recent years, intimidating entire neighborhoods.

"Defendants repeatedly arm themselves with guns, knives and other dangerous weapons and engage in violent, aggressive and destructive behavior, which is injurious to the health and safety of the community," the injunction read in part.

Although the rival Sureno gang also operates in the Fairfield-Suisun area, authorities have as yet taken no injunctive action against that group, apparently adopting a one-gang-at-a-time approach until they can gauge the effectiveness of the Norteno injunction.

Fairfield police reportedly identified several suspected members of the gang in an attempt to serve them with formal notification of the injunction.

Several of those identified as Nortenos have since complained, denying any gang affiliation. Two of them, Mario Ernest Huevo and Lucio Gonzalez, have retained Point Richmond attorney Paul Feuerwerker to formally bring their denials to court. Also denying gang membership were Fairfield resident Eli Angulo, Pelican Bay State Prison inmate Frank David Estrada and Solano County Jail inmate MacKenzie Clifton.

Similar injunctions have proved successful against gang activities in the Los Angeles, San Diego and West Sacramento areas.



**COBB COUNTY NEWS** 5:48 p.m. Wednesday, August 19, 2009

## Brothers sentenced in Cobb gang shooting

By [Andria Simmons](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Two brothers convicted of murder in a gang-related shooting were sentenced to life plus five years in prison Wednesday in what the judge described as “one of the most difficult cases I’ve had to hear

Cobb County Superior Court Judge Kenneth Nix said the killing of Eduardo Delgadillo, 19, on Oct. 4, 2008, was “a senseless act made even more senseless by the preliminary events.”

The judge said he was particularly troubled by the young age of the defendants, Eduardo and Gerardo Sifuentes, who were 18 and 22, respectively, when the shooting occurred.

The victim was a member of the Surenos 13 street gang, while the Sifuentes brothers are admitted Nortenos 14 gangsters. Tensions escalated between the rival gangs after Delgadillo’s wife had a run-in with a Nortenos gang member at Ivy Commons apartment complex in Austell. She testified during the trial that a Nortenos gang member walked behind her in the parking lot and muttered under his breath as if mocking her.

Delgadillo allegedly went to the complex later that afternoon to confront the Nortenos. The rival gangs had several subsequent confrontations throughout that day, but the dispute came to a head when Eduardo Sifuentes telephoned his brother and asked him to come over.

Police said Gerardo Sifuentes brought a 12-gauge shotgun. He fatally shot Delgadillo and wounded two other Surenos gang members, Elijah Espinoza and Mauricio Medina.

Assistant District Attorney Jesse Evans asked the court not to let the Sifuentes brothers off easily, noting that Eduardo Sifuentes had a juvenile record related to street gang involvement dating back to 2004.

“For years Eduardo Sifuentes has been on notice that his gang activity was going to get him into trouble,” Evans said.

The Sifuentes brothers will not be eligible for parole for 30 years.



## March trial set for 2008 killings

2 men slain outside home in 2008

By VIRGINIA HENNESSEY

Herald Salinas Bureau

Updated: 08/14/2009 01:36:41 AM PDT

After delays related to witness identification, a March 2010 trial date was set Thursday for four men accused of murder in what police say was a case of mistaken identity.

Roman Gasca, 19; Daniel Aragon, 19; his brother, Samuel Aragon, 18; and Mike Martinez, 20, are charged in the shooting deaths of Adrian Varela and Andres Alcala Jr., who was an employee at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Varela, 26, and Alcala, 28, were standing in a group outside Alcala's Salinas home after watching a basketball game May 25, 2008, when they were gunned down by occupants of a passing car.

Police arrested Gasca and Daniel Aragon a short time later during a traffic stop.

Samuel Aragon was charged as an accomplice for allegedly monitoring police activity over a scanner while the other suspects carried out the crime.

Martinez was arrested seven months later on suspicion of being the shooter who escaped the vehicle with the murder weapon the night of the attack.

Police say the four are Norteño gang members who believed they were shooting rival Sureños. However, police say, no one in the group that was attacked had gang affiliations.

The case has been delayed for a number of reasons, including the logistics of coordinating the schedules of four defense attorneys, the prosecutor and the judge.

The Monterey County Public Defender's office is challenging the manner in which Gasca and Daniel Aragon were arrested and shown to witnesses who identified them at the scene of their arrest.

Judge Timothy Roberts will hear testimony and arguments Sept. 25 on a motion by defense attorney Erin Wennerholm contending that Salinas police officer Omar Peña did not have probable cause to stop the car. Peña, who will testify at the hearing, has said the driver was driving suspiciously.

Wennerholm has filed a separate motion arguing that police tainted the identification process by bringing an eyewitness to view Gasca and Daniel Aragon after they were in custody at the scene of the traffic stop. Defense attorneys and some legal experts claim such "in-field" lineups are too suggestive and lead to false identifications.

Roberts previously denied Wennerholm's request that he order investigators to arrange a traditional lineup in Monterey County Jail. That decision was upheld by the Sixth District Court of Appeal a week ago.

Wennerholm's supervisor, Assistant Public Defender Don Landis, was preparing a writ Thursday to take the issue to the state Supreme Court.



Walter Medina, 22

## **Arrest made in 2007 Live Oak shootout**

[Comments 0](#) | [Recommend 0](#)

August 11, 2009 11:57:00 AM

[Appeal-Democrat](#)

A Live Oak gang member wanted for attempted murder in a 2007 shootout with a rival gang has been arrested in Reno, a law enforcement official said today.

In March 2007, Walter Medina, 22, a Norteños gang member, exchanged shots with two members of the Sureños gang near Medina's home in the 2600 block of Laurellen Street, said Mike Hudson, commander of the Yuba-Sutter Narcotic Enforcement Team, or NET-5.

The incident started when Medina began yelling obscenities and called the rivals "scraps," a derogatory term for Sureños, said Hudson.

The Sureños were arrested but Medina fled and was wanted on a \$1 million warrant, said Hudson.

Over the past three weeks, the Sutter County Gang Task Force, a part of NET-5, received information that Medina was staying in Reno and occasionally driving his 2006 Chevrolet Impala to Live Oak to visit friends and fellow gang members, said Hudson.

The Gang Task Force asked the Reno Police Department to be on the lookout for the Impala, which officers spotted about 11 p.m. Monday. Medina, who was in the car with two other Norteños, gave officers a false name, but officers e-mailed his photo to Sutter County where he was positively identified, said Hudson.

A semiautomatic handgun and drug paraphernalia were found in the car's trunk.

Medina was booked into a Nevada jail and was waiting today for extradition to Sutter County where he will face charges of attempted murder and criminal street gang participation, said Hudson.

## Gang member testifies he shot rivals to protect brother

By [Andria Simmons](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Gerardo Sifuentes has two families, the one he was born into and the street gang he was "blessed" into at age 12.

But it was his blood brother — not Nortenos 14 — that Sifuentes said he was watching out for on Oct. 4, 2008, when he shot three rival gang members at an apartment complex in Austell.

"It was about going to get my little brother and make sure he got out safe," said Sifuentes, who is on trial this week in Cobb County with his brother, Eduardo Sifuentes.

Gerardo Sifuentes is accused of killing 19-year-old Eduardo Delgadillo and wounding Elijah Espinoza and Mauricio Medina during a gang confrontation. Eduardo Sifuentes is charged with murder as a party to the crime.

The victims were members of the rival street gang Surenos 13, or Sur-13.

Gerardo Sifuentes, 23, testified Friday that he went to the Ivy Commons apartment complex to pick up his brother because he feared for his safety. Earlier in the day, a Nortenos gangster allegedly followed Delgadillo's wife, a Sur-13 affiliate, through the complex and mocked her. Tensions between the two gangs escalated several hours later when a Sureno sought retaliation by punching 18-year-old Eduardo Sifuentes in the face.

Gerardo Sifuentes testified that he brought a shotgun when he went to pick up Eduardo from the complex because "I don't know anybody that takes a knife to a gunfight."

He said he fired at the Surenos because they were advancing toward him and yelling. He said he believed at least one of them had a gun.

Prosecutor Jesse Evans sought to cast doubt upon Gerardo's Sifuentes' self-defense claim during cross-examination. He pointed out that Delgadillo wasn't armed. One of the other victims was shot in the back.

"You intended this to be a gunfight, didn't you?" Evans said. "You could have met your brother anywhere, yet you chose the one spot where everybody in a rival gang was."

The state and defense both rested their cases Friday. Jurors are expected to begin deliberating Monday.



## Teen is Salinas' 20th homicide

Police investigate whether recent violence is part of Norteño power struggle

By JULIA REYNOLDS and DANIEL LOPEZ

Herald Salinas Bureau

Updated: 08/05/2009 07:53:04 AM PDT

A 17-year-old Salinas boy became the city's 20th homicide victim of the year after he was shot about 8 p.m. Tuesday outside his home on Yucatan Way.

Sgt. Don Cline said the youth was entering his house when at least one gunman fired multiple times, striking the boy. He was taken to Natividad Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead a short time later. His name was not released late Tuesday.

Witnesses told police they saw the gunman and at least one person flee in a white truck. Cline said police have made no arrests and are searching for the assailants.

He said it is too soon to tell if the shooting is gang-related or related to any recent homicides.

Tuesday's slaying was the sixth homicide in eight days in Salinas.

Gang investigators are looking into whether recent brazen shootings in Salinas are part of a "clean-up" or power struggle among Norteño gang members.

Investigators have taken note of the boldness of the recent attacks in Salinas and said several of the victims were specifically targeted.

Six people were killed and another critically wounded in a series of shootings that began when two men were shot July 27.

In past decades, the city has witnessed prolonged periods of violence at times when power struggles within the Norteños and their "parent" crime organization, the Nuestra Familia prison gang, have translated into battles in the streets. At times, the shooting sprees included attacks on gang deserters and rivals who competed with the gang for drug-dealing turf.

"These spikes of violence are not uncommon in Salinas. Unfortunately, we have been suffering from these for years," Cline said late Tuesday.

At least three of the six recent slaying victims were affiliated with Norteño gangs, police said, as was Joseph Cruz Bustamante, 26, another targeted man who was shot July 27 but has not contacted police or local hospitals.

Several people who were shot were gang "dropouts," a designation that could put them on hit lists, investigators said, although dropouts are sometimes left alone if they are not thought to be competing with the gang for revenue.

Police were quick to say Tuesday they do not know if Monday's shooting victim, Arturo Navarro Marquez, 30, had gang ties, but said they have not ruled it out.

Court records show Marquez was convicted of possessing methamphetamine in 2004 and was arrested several other times on drug charges. His probation terms did not indicate a gang affiliation.

Salinas police Sgt. Christopher Lane said the large number of shots fired at Marquez makes his shooting stand out from the spontaneous or random drive-by attacks that are more common among young gang members.

"It was more like an execution," he said.

Lane said police are investigating whether retaliation shootings have been part of the mix this week.

Two victims, Roy Ramirez, 28, who was shot July 28, and Antonio Quintero, 21, who was killed one day later, had family ties.

Alberto Arizpe, who was fatally shot when gunmen burst into his residence late Sunday, was reportedly placed on Norteño "no good" lists after he was convicted of child abuse in 1999. That case left a 22-month-old boy with a broken leg and head and arm injuries. Arizpe was 18 at the time.

Judge Robert Moody, after hearing testimony that a 12-year-old witness told police he had seen Arizpe torment and torture the toddler, said Arizpe had suffered terrible abuses "at an extremely young age."

"It's an extremely sick situation," Moody said at Arizpe's sentencing. "You have committed acts which are absolutely inhuman. They are unspeakable."

When Arizpe was sent to a state prison in Delano to begin a seven-year sentence in 2000, Norteño inmates assaulted him and forced him out of the gang because of the child abuse conviction, several people familiar with his case said.

Mayor Dennis Donohue acknowledged that the recent attacks were "brazen" and "out of the ordinary," and said "fundamentally, there is no guarantee of anyone's personal safety who chooses to be involved with that life."

He said the city remains committed to putting "game-changer" tactics into place, but insisted they will take time.

"Qualitative and quantitative investments are needed to break the cycle," he said.

The city and its police department have begun to implement "community-involved" policing strategies, including sending emergency response teams that offer support to families of victims and strive to prevent retaliatory shootings.

But residents must remember that results from innovative and even "proven" approaches are not instantaneous, Donohue said.

Salinas is notable among California cities because in recent years its homicide rate has been nearly 100 percent gang-related. Crime experts consider 40 percent or higher to be a very high level of gang crime.

At least 18 of the 20 slayings this year have gang involvement, police said. Of last year's record 25 homicides, 23 were gang-related.

"It's gotten too big," Donohue said. "We need to make the investment."

## **Lockdown at Sonoma County jail tentatively lifted**

Tuesday, August 4, 2009

Santa Rosa, Calif. (AP) --Inmates at the Sonoma County Jail identified as members of a violent street gang have some of their privileges back after a five-day lockdown.

Sonoma County Sheriff's Department Capt. Randall Walker says Norteno gang members serving time in the jail are expected to be able to once again have visits from their families, friends and lawyers as early as Tuesday.

The inmates had been on lockdown after a series of fights in the jail last week.

A lockdown of all jail inmates was ordered after racial tensions escalated into fights Wednesday and Thursday.

Three jail employees were injured. No inmates were injured.

Walker says Norteno gang members have not yet gained other privileges including recreation time.

## **South San Francisco police searching for gunman who shot a man in the head Thursday morning**

**Bay City News Service**

Posted: 07/31/2009 06:17:19 AM PDT

Police are looking for a suspected Norteno gang member believed to be responsible for shooting a man in the head in South San Francisco early Thursday morning.

A 28-year-old San Francisco man was reportedly shot with a small caliber revolver by Ariel Cabeza, 23, at around 1:30 a.m., according to the South San Francisco Police Department.

The victim was taken to a hospital in critical condition.

Witnesses to the shooting identified Cabeza as the gunman, and the attempted homicide is being investigated as gang related, according to police.

Officers reported finding Cabeza's vehicle in San Leandro, and announced the suspect could be in the San Mateo area or in South San Francisco. He is considered armed and dangerous.

Anyone with information regarding Cabeza or the shooting is asked to contact the South San Francisco Police Department at (650) 877-8900.

## **FBI to assist in Monterey County gang fight**

By DANIEL LOPEZ - Monterey County Herald

Posted: 07/15/2009 01:30:15 AM PDT

SALINAS -- Monterey County officials say a new partnership with the FBI will intensify efforts to crackdown on local gangs.

The collaboration -- which was announced at a news conference Tuesday at Salinas City Hall -- is designed to target gang leaders rather than street-level members, and disrupt gang networks with federal prosecution.

"Our ultimate goal is to dismantle entire organizations from the top down," said FBI special agent Chris Carroll.

Carroll supervises the FBI's North Central Coast Gang Task Force, which covers Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties. It is one of 13 FBI anti-gang teams in the state.

Sheriff's Cmdr. Mike Richards said the details are still being worked out but the plan is to have an FBI agent work full time with the county gang task force. At the same time, a member of the local task force will join a regional FBI anti-gang team.

Carroll said that while local enforcement efforts to arrest gang members responsible for violent crimes are important, they do little to disrupt gang structure.

"There's always somebody to come in and take over," he said.

The majority of Monterey County's gangs are affiliated with the Nortenos, a subset of the Nuestra Familia prison gang.

Police say disputes between them and rival gangs such as the Surenos, who align with the Mexican Mafia, have a hand in most violent crime that occurs in the county.

Salinas Police Chief Louis Fetherolf said federal agencies play an important role in the gang battle.

"We can't overcome these issues unless we have collaboration," he said.

Salinas Mayor Dennis Donohue and County Supervisor Lou Calcagno also applauded the partnership.

FBI special agent Stephanie Douglas said Tuesday the biggest advantage of a partnership is the ability to share information and conduct long-term investigations into gang activity, crossing over jurisdictional boundaries and international borders.

Carroll said the FBI involvement can help fund investigations that require undercover operations or time commitments that local police are unable to fulfill.

"All those sort of things cost money," he said.

FBI agents said they could not provide a dollar figure on the resources they are committing to efforts in Monterey County.

Sheriff Mike Kanalakis, who is chairman of the steering committee for the county gang task force, said the FBI's involvement will enhance its ability to investigate gangs and get to their roots.

Gang members will also face potential federal prosecution, which results in stiffer penalties and disrupts gang communication by moving members out of their networks.

"We are trying to get to the core of the problem, Kanalakis said. "We will see the benefits down the road as federal investigations develop."

He said that since the county task force was formed in 2005, officers have made assets forfeitures worth thousands of dollars, made more than 2,500 arrests and confiscated least 200 firearms.

The agencies with officers on the task force are the Salinas, Soledad and Seaside police departments, the county probation department, the California Highway Patrol and the sheriff's office.

Kanalakis said he hopes that one day every city in the county will participate in the task force.

Still, District Attorney Dean Flippo reminded residents that while the partnership with the FBI may improve the ability to suppress gang crime, community gang prevention and intervention efforts need to continue.

"We all realize we can't have a police officer on every corner," he said.

## Crackdown or Back Down?

Morgan Hill Observer

Jul 13, 2009, by Jessica Fromm | Read more: [News](#)

As violence spreads, South County officials struggle with a lack of money— or a lack of political will



**By Erin Sherbert**

OFFICER Geoff Guerin slams the accelerator of his white unmarked car and guns it down a narrow alley near Louis Street. A group of men huddled in the center of the alley take off running, tossing beer cans, baseball caps and cigarettes as they sprint and hop over fences.

Guerin jumps out of the car with his hand on his holster.

He yells as he runs: "Garcia! Garcia!" He is after a portly man wearing a large black T-shirt and nylon shorts hanging over his knees. The man runs toward a dilapidated two-story apartment complex tucked at the end of the alleyway. Apparently realizing there's nowhere to go, he slows down, walking back toward Guerin with his hands over his head.

Guerin and his partner, Officer Doug Remmick, snap handcuffs on his wrists. The man, 20-year-old Andrew Garcia, is a well-known parolee—according to Guerin, one of Gilroy's most hardened criminals, born into the Norteño street gang.

The two cops return to the patrol car with evidence that Garcia was in violation the terms of his parole: a San Francisco 49ers cap. Guerin, who has been working for Gilroy's gang unit since the early 1990s, explains that local Norteños wear 49ers caps as a not-quite clandestine way of identifying themselves—and Garcia is not allowed to associate with gangs or wear gang colors.

This is part of a concerted effort on the part of Gilroy police to confront a gang problem that has exploded in recent years. Guerin and his partner call for backup, and then continue with their mission this Friday night: tracking and arresting Gilroy's most notorious gang members.

"We look for the worst element of the community, and then look for any legal reason to arrest them," Guerin says, adding that, like sex offenders, gang members have to register with local police once they get out of prison. This helps police keep close tabs on affiliated gang members after they are released.

On the way back to the police station, Guerin and his partner drive past the corner of Church and Sixth streets, pointing to a cluster of candles. It's a makeshift memorial for

an 18-year-old gang member who was shot to death in broad daylight on Nov. 11, the officers explain.

According to police records, witnesses saw three men running north on Church Street immediately after the shooting. "His friends carried him to that corner on the next block, and then left him there when they heard the police sirens," Remmick says.

Police have been tight-lipped about details in this case, but emphatically note that they are aggressively investigating this murder.

### **Battle Fields**

Gangs infiltrated the South Bay in the late 1970s, shortly after the infamous La Nuestra Familia prison gang organized a minigovernment in Salinas. There, they collected "taxes" from gang members dealing dope in town. Salinas, the gang-murder capital of California, has seen its homicide rate double in the last year, according to news reports.



The "NF" gang quickly grew into an organized chain of command, with captains and lieutenants just like the military. Gang members soon infiltrated Gilroy, which was fertile ground for recruiting new members and collecting more drug taxes. By the 1980s, Gilroy had become an active base for the prison gang's drug smuggling.

"They wiped out any drug dealer that was not associated with the Nuestra Familia," Guerin says. "Look at the history of murders in Gilroy—there were Nuestra Familia hits all over town. They came in and said you can pay us taxes or we will take care of you. And that was how the message was sent."

While Nuestra Familia continued dominating Gilroy's east side neighborhoods, in the 1990s, Mexican nationals began to arrive in larger numbers to work in the fields. Many of them eventually formed their own gangs to protect themselves from the local gang members. They started calling themselves the Sureños, or the southerners.

Consequently, Nuestra Familia became the northerners—the Norteños.

Although police have worked to break up the street gangs, they continue to multiply, with various cliques of Norteños and Sureños all over town. Today, police have documented roughly 900 gang members in Gilroy.

They aren't just growing in size; Gilroy's street gangs are also becoming more violent. Since 2007, gang-related activity, violent crime in particular, has increased 30 percent. Assaults with a deadly weapon are on the rise, and last year there were three gang-related murders.

Gang violence for decades consisted of turf wars on the east side of town. That is no longer the case. Starting 10 years ago, the gangs began to spread out, with stabbings, fights and shootings in almost every pocket of town.

Police blame the recent surge in gang violence on the bad economy. Privately and publicly, they also complain that as the tide of crime rises, police budgets are being slashed, so the force is shrinking. But some public officials, including some City Council members, say it goes beyond that.

### **Prevent Now or Pay Later**

Gilroy has historically lagged when it comes to paying for gang prevention. While San Jose has invested about \$5 million annually in gang prevention, even in hard times, Gilroy just hasn't consistently had a strong political will—or the money—to crack down on its gang problem.

Asked to discuss the problem, Mayor Al Pinheiro tried to play it down. "We have our problems," Pinheiro snaps. "But let's not get the media hyped up and point to Gilroy as a hard-core gang kind of place."

Nevertheless, the community is certainly concerned. In an April new poll conducted by the Gilroy Dispatch 69 percent of those who responded said they did not feel safe going into downtown Gilroy, the city's hub of bars, restaurants—and gangs.

Violent incidents began to increase late last year. On Sept. 29, a gang member was driving down Monterey Highway and Farrell Street when he shot and killed a rival gang member who was sitting in the passenger side of a car.



Less than a month later, rival gang members got into a fight on the sidewalk at Church and Sixth streets, and 18-year-old Larry Martinez was killed [see accompanying story]. Since then, a number of gang-related drive-by shootings and stabbings have been reported.

On May 9, at about 4pm, an officer interrupted a fight along Monterey Road, where four gang members had assaulted and stabbed a 20-year-old man downtown. San Jose resident Richard Montoya, 19, was running from the scene after officers showed up. Police caught up with him and immediately cuffed him. Police then combed the area, looking for the other assailants. They found 22-year-old Celso Flores and 20-year-old Julio Larios and arrested them. The fourth alleged assailant is still on the loose, according to police.

"I think someone needs to champion these issues and create a sense of urgency around the emerging gang problem," says Angel Rios, a Gilroy resident who works with gangs and at-risk youth for the city of San Jose. "For a city the size of Gilroy, people should be concerned."

In January, Police Chief Denise Turner held one of two gang awareness forums where residents packed the room, hoping to get some answers about the upswing in gang activity.

"People are really unsettled," says Turner, who was appointed chief last year. "We are trying to keep a lid on the gang problem, but it's not easy. We have to step it up."

Gilroy is no Salinas, but the gang violence hasn't been this bad since the early 1990s, when Gilroy had its first drive-by shooting. After that and other gang-related crimes, the community rallied the City Council, which later agreed to form the anti-crime unit with designated detectives for gang suppression. At the time, then-Mayor Don Gage, who is now a Santa Clara County supervisor, teamed up with the police chief to create Gilroy's first gang task force.

Gage went into the community and raised \$200,000 to buy the old Pacific Gas & Electric building on the corner of Sixth Street and Railroad Avenue to convert into a youth center. He collaborated with the Mexican American Community Services Agency, giving the nonprofit free rent and the space in that building to help at-risk youth. They've made it a priority to take kids to baseball games, to the movies or just help them with homework, Gage says.

"What it did was take care of the kids who wanted to get out of gangs and didn't have any place to go," Gage says, adding that "their fathers and grandfathers were in gangs."

Now, Gage says, Gilroy needs more than youth centers.

"The gang problem has become a lot worse because it is spreading and it's more hard-core," he says. "When it gets that hard-core, doing the things I was doing has little or no effect."

The gang task force, which has since evolved into a nonprofit group, has been a consistent presence in Gilroy. Yet critics say the task force has weak organization and leadership, and as a result it has been ineffective at truly targeting at-risk youth.

On top of that, the city, which contributed a mere \$40,000 to the youth center for salaries, lacks amenities—even adequate parks and recreation programs—that would give kids another alternative, residents say.

## **No Escape**

In January, the city's youth center was closed down after it was deemed seismically unsafe. Since then, the city has offered similar activities for kids at the senior center.

That facility is farther away from the east side, which is where the greatest need is, says John Garcia, executive director of the gang task force. He noted that since the youth center closed, he's seen fewer and fewer kids dropping by the senior center.

Gage wants to see more commitment from the community. "You need a gang task force that has people who make decisions," Gage says. "They can't just be there because it feels good."

In the county's southernmost city, money and community groups are scarce. Physically and metaphorically, Gilroy is isolated from county resources. There isn't a strong, savvy political network to help Gilroy lobby for resources.

The city was recently rejected when it sought a state grant to help pay for a gang coordinator, similar to what San Jose has. It has also applied for federal stimulus money to help fund a school resource officer position that's currently in jeopardy, the chief says. The Police Department won't find out about the federal money until the fall.

"Gilroy is the stepchild of the county," says Gilroy Councilman Peter Arellano. At the same time, Arellano admits that the council hasn't been bullish about putting its own money and resources into gang prevention. What little money the city does get from the county, it has used to fund DARE officers, which some believe to be an inefficient use of those funds.

"The political will isn't there," Arellano says. "I think we have been out front on intervention and suppression, but I don't think we are doing enough in prevention, because unfortunately, prevention takes money and effort.

"The community needs to do something."

The downturn in the economy has put Gilroy in an especially weak position this past year. Gilroy continues to have the highest unemployment rate of all cities in Santa Clara County. In April, Gilroy had a 16 percent unemployment rate compared to San Jose's 12 percent. The city, which is 60 percent Hispanic, has also been hit with the highest percentage of home foreclosures in the county.

The council last year cut \$4 million from its budget, including police officers and parks and recreation programs. It's now considering cutting another \$4 million this year.

In January, the police chief had no choice but to cut the department's intervention probation officer—the sole person who would interface with at-risk youth and kids in gangs. This officer would take referrals from school resources officers who would keep tabs on kids in gangs. The officer would make calls and even go to their homes to talk with their parents about their kids being in gangs.

Gilroy's police gang supervisor, Sgt. Chad Gallacinao, is especially disturbed by this news. "It was the most important part," he says. "Now there is going to be a whole generation of kids we will miss regarding prevention and intervention."

### **A Model Community**

Back in April, Santa Clara County's District Attorney Dolores Carr stepped up to the podium outside the old City Hall in San Jose. A republican who was elected to office in 2006, Carr stood before reporters and TV cameras announcing her latest campaign to go after gangs.

The DA, who sits on San Jose's Mayor's Gang Task Force, has made gang intervention a hallmark of her tenure since she took office. Earlier this year, she rolled out a countywide resource to help parents know how to keep their kids out of gangs. Last year, her office contributed \$100,000 to San Jose's Safe Summer initiative. She's planning to do it again this year. Last year, more than 7,000 kids signed up for the 400 different activities paid for through the program, everything from art classes to baseball steams.

San Jose saw a 31 percent decrease in overall gang crimes during the summer months between 2007 and 2008. The city approved another \$500,000 for the program this year.

More recently, Carr's office shelled out \$60,000 to hang posters and tower billboards through the county with provocative anti-gang messages.

As Carr spoke to reporters, San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed as well as police chiefs and sheriff deputies at her side nodded their heads in support. Behind her was a VTA bus, with one of the freshly printed campaign posters on its side—a smoky image of a cemetery with an eerie message scribbled across: "Gangs have a place for your children."

"We are here today because, frankly, gang violence tears at the fabric of our community," Carr said, squinting into the morning sun. "We have certainly seen an increase in gang violence in the last year, and we have made a more concerted effort to deal with that."

A week later, Carr sat in a conference room on the fifth floor of the county offices. She explained that it's tricky to get underneath the growing gang violence in South County when so much of the effort has been San Jose–centric. Her goal is to stretch those efforts farther down south, starting with this anti-gang media campaign.

South County buses will have the anti-gang posters. But that's as far as the campaign will go in South County. There will be no billboards towering over roads in Morgan Hill or Gilroy, in part because her office says there is nowhere to place them.

When someone says "gangs know no boundaries," policymakers always nod in agreement. But there has been no significant push to pool local resources and form a countywide gang prevention task force.

Carr says a countywide task force isn't a bad idea, assuming there's political will. It seems that South County police chiefs are itching for some help.

In Gilroy, Chief Turner has had back-and-forth conversations with the mayor's office in San Jose, looking to copy that gang task force model. San Jose's gang prevention task force was created more than a decade ago, when then-Mayor Susan Hammer wanted to tap city resources to slow the proliferation of gangs.

At that time, her message was rather blunt: stop the gang violence. The mayor placed an emphasis on catching gang members and putting them in jail. That vision has shifted more toward stopping kids from joining gangs.

The task force now funds more than 20 community organizations. Some of the programs include tattoo removal, conflict resolution, substance abuse counseling and after-school activities aimed to keep kids busy at all hours, including midnight basketball.

At the county level, policymakers have said they plan to probe the discussion of forming a countywide gang prevention task force. Supervisor George Shirakawa, who was

elected to the board this year, says as soon as the board blows through this budget crunch, he plans to start talking about gang prevention on a more macro level.

"It's no secret that gangs have no borders—it's not something we realized yesterday," Shirakawa quipped. "We know there are needs in the South County and unincorporated areas. I haven't had the chance to get everyone together. But I will."

### **The Revolving Door**

Guerin and Remmick met Garcia with his parole officer back at the police station, where he was being booked for parole violation. He had just been released from prison.

Next to Garcia, another Norteño gang member from Morgan Hill smiled and flexed his chest muscles as officers snapped of his mug shot. He boastfully chattered away with officers.

He was there for assault, he tells Guerin, a familiar face among Gilroy's gangsters.

That's just it. Arresting gang members and locking them up only makes them harder and stronger gang members.

"They go to prison to get schooled," Guerin says pointedly as he watches police book Garcia. "Then they come back and teach everyone what they learned."



**Early Nuestra Familia leadership**

# San Jose Mercury News

## Gang factions clash across the county

[By Jennifer Squires - Sentinel staff writer](#)

Posted: 06/26/2009 01:30:38 AM PDT

Updated: 06/26/2009 05:01:11 AM PDT

Gangs have existed in Santa Cruz County for decades, but in recent years their members have become increasingly mobile, and areas once known as strongholds for either Nortenos or Surenos are now in flux.

"Traditionally they were neighborhood gangs," said sheriff's Sgt. Roy Morales, who has been investigating county gang crime for a dozen years. "Now they're not. Basically the seed has spread."

Latino gangs originated in the prison system. In the late 1960s, Latino inmates in the state prison system were being picked on by other inmates, so they formed a group for protection, gang experts say. They were "city people" from the Los Angeles area who called themselves the "Mexican Mafia." The group adopted the No. 13 as their symbol -- m is the 13th letter in the alphabet -- and the color blue.

Shortly thereafter, northern Latino farmworkers who were incarcerated formed their own group. They called themselves "Nuestra Familia," claimed the color red and the No. 14, as n is the 14th letter.

The dividing line between the Mexican Mafia, or Surenos, and Nuestra Familia, or Nortenos, is somewhere near Bakersfield: red above and blue below.

However, that hasn't prevented gang clashes in Santa Cruz County, which contains a mix of red and blue gang members numbering nearly 600, law enforcement officials estimate.

Years ago, Nortenos found their way to Watsonville, while Surenos -- migrating north from Los Angeles -- took hold in Santa Cruz, according to police. Now multiple factions of both gangs exist in each city, and other sects claim parts of Mid-County, especially Live Oak, as their territory. So in addition to the natural red-blue rivalry, there is some in-fighting among subgroups of the same gang.

Like the military, gangs have a leadership structure. The highest-ranking gang members are usually imprisoned, but have lieutenants and others below them who carry out orders. Some of the gang crime in the county, though not much, is the result of prison decrees, according to local law enforcement.

Santa Cruz

Until the early 1990s, there was just one Sureno gang in Santa Cruz, but the gang split over the drug market, said Santa Cruz officer Arnold Vasquez, who has been a gang investigator for half of his nine-year career: "The younger guys wanted to get a piece of the pie. That was when we really started to see a lot of kids claiming those cliques or subgroups."

The Sureno factions that exist within the city today don't do business together -- that is, sell drugs or buy guns -- but other than that generally get along, according to Vasquez.

Nortenos became established in the city as a response to the Surenos, according to police.

Children of farmworkers who lived on the Westside and in the Beach Flats neighborhood were being terrorized by Sureno gang members, so the children of farmworkers banded together for protection, forming the city's first Norteno gang, Vasquez said.

"A lot of this stuff was really tightly organized in Watsonville before it ever was in Santa Cruz," he said.

Now there are two Norteno subgroups in the city, though their presence isn't as strong as it is in South County, and Nortenos in Santa Cruz are still outnumbered by Surenos, police said.

Watsonville

Historically, Watsonville is a Norteno area, but for a long time there wasn't a lot of the "What do you claim?" issues in the city, according to police.

The red-blue divide "kind of crept up," Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina said.

There are seven or eight active Norteno subgroups in the city.

For years, there had only been one Sureno gang but now there are two, said Watsonville police Sgt. Eric Taylor. The split is now about 70-30 in favor of Nortenos, he estimated.

Gang violence has fluctuated in the city over the years. Medina remembers a rash of gang shootings in 1996: "We have gone through these periods. Our challenge always is to mobilize quickly."

In addition to violence, gang members have become increasingly involved in drug sales in the past five or six years. Taylor said the drug trade in Watsonville is evenly divided between what's controlled by gangs and what is being imported from Mexico.

Police have targeted gang-involved drug trafficking with several long-term undercover investigations. The crackdowns also focused on car thefts, burglaries and gun sales that involve gang members.

No boundaries

Over the years, gang affiliations have changed with demographics, resulting in a patchwork of red and blue territory across the county.

Crackdowns on known gang hangouts have dispersed gangs but not reduced their numbers, according to police.

For example, in Santa Cruz, police have worked to clear out gang hot spots in the Beach Flats neighborhood and apartments on Chestnut Street. Both areas were claimed by Sureno subgroups, but rules prohibiting gang members from living in the mustard-colored Nueva Vista apartments in Beach Flats and the apartments on Chestnut Street have curtailed some of the gang activity. Families can be evicted for harboring gang members in the complexes, Vasquez said.

"I think that changed the dynamic," he said.

However, just because gang members don't live in the neighborhood doesn't mean they don't spend time there. Vasquez said when he patrols Beach Flats at night, he typically sees four to six known Sureno gang members hanging out on the street even though they live elsewhere.

Two Sureno gang members arrested for and convicted of murdering a Fresno man in Beach Flats three summers ago claimed that neighborhood, though both lived in Live Oak.

Gangs are more mobile than ever, as evidenced by the January slaying of a Santa Cruz man on Soquel Avenue by two suspected gang members from Watsonville.

Police said gang members use social networking sites to boast about their crimes or call their members to action. At least two Watsonville gangs have MySpace pages -- complete with gang-inspired hip-hop and photos of members flashing signs -- where gang members boast about their toughness and willingness to defend their neighborhood.

Despite a commonly held belief, the majority of gang crimes are not committed by illegal immigrants, police and prosecutors say. Regardless, an accused gang member here illegally face charges like any other defendant, then is dealt with by immigration officials after the court process and any jail sentence has been completed.

Behind bars

It is jail and prison, where Surenos and Nortenos got their start, where gang members connect, increase their status in the gang and plot crimes. Rival gangs fight one another, and gangsters use creative methods to get their messages out to members on the outside. Many times, incarcerated gang members use their girlfriends, who are not in the gang, as a communication link, according to Morales, from the Sheriff's Office.

"I think it's a naive role," Morales said. "They're used. A lot of them don't know they're being used."

Girlfriends are another way gang members get guns. They rarely have police records, so they are free to purchase weapons. Gangs also acquire guns through burglaries, by stealing them from friends or relatives, or, if they don't have records yet, buying the guns themselves, police said.

Though gang members were using knives as their weapons of choice earlier in the year -- to such an extreme that a Santa Cruz man started the Web site [stabsantacruz.com](http://stabsantacruz.com) to track the number of stabbings in the county -- police said in recent months they've seized numerous guns from gang members. Also, a rash of shootings this month in both Watsonville and Santa Cruz has been linked to gang rivalries.

"The way they operate, the types of crimes they're committing and the methods that they use are the same, but we see fluctuations in the activity," Watsonville gang expert Taylor said. "Over the last year, we've seen this recent spike in activity."

## **Santa Cruz Gangs**

### **NORTENOS**

Name: Nuestra Familia

Color: Red

Number: 14

Historic territory: Watsonville

### **SURENOS**

Name: Mexican Mafia

Color: Blue

Number: 13

Historic territory: Santa Cruz



Angel Solarzano, 19



Cristian Giovanni Jimenez, 20

## Gilroy Dispatch

### D.A. charges both sides with murder for gang slaying

Tuesday, June 09, 2009

By Sara Suddes

The district attorney is pulling out all stops to arrest gang members, using a rarely invoked rule to bring murder charges against five suspects - including three friends of the man who was shot down.

Police have arrested two men and one woman in connection with last year's shooting death of 18-year-old Larry Martinez - which took place just blocks away from the Gilroy Police Department - and police are searching for two additional suspects. Police arrested Heather Ashford, 18, and Angel Solarzano, 19, both of Gilroy, Monday on murder warrants in connection with Martinez' slaying. Last week, police also arrested Cristian Giovanni Jimenez, 21, on a murder warrant, on an administrative warrant from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, on an additional unspecified warrant and for probation violation.

The case is unusual because neither the police nor the district attorney allege that either Ashford or Solarzano, who were fighting on the same side as Martinez, shot him. However, both agencies said that the pair -

along with a third outstanding suspect - were involved in acts that caused other people to shoot and kill Martinez.

Thus, the district attorney's office can charge the trio that was with Martinez with murder under what is known as the provocative act murder rule, said Assistant District Attorney David Howe. The trio was involved in criminal activity and knew the consequences of their provocative acts could endanger human life, he said.

"It set in motion a chain of events they should have known would result in someone's death," Howe said.

In addition to the three suspects who accompanied Martinez, the district attorney's office issued murder warrants for two others who were involved in the altercation - one of whom was Jimenez. At least one of these two people was directly involved in shooting Martinez, police said.

About 1 p.m. Nov. 11, 2008, a group of Sure'o gang members, including Jimenez, threw an object at a passing vehicle near Church and Sixth streets, according to police and witnesses who were at the scene of the shooting. The vehicle was driven by Ashford and contained three other passengers, including Martinez, Solarzano and another female passenger who is not being charged, said Sgt. Jim Gillio. Both Martinez and Solarzano were Norte'o gang members, Gillio said.

The vehicle's occupants left the area to pick up another man - who is not in police custody - and drop off the female passenger, Gillio said. Ashford and the three men then returned about 1:20 p.m. to the area near Sixth and Church streets to confront the group of Sure'os.

The vehicle's three male occupants - Martinez, Solarzano and the third suspected Norte'o male - exited the vehicle to confront the group of Sure'os, Gillio said. Martinez was carrying a small baseball bat, Gillio said. Ashford remained in the vehicle.

As he approached the Sure'os, Martinez raised his bat in a threatening manner and two of the Sure'os pulled out handguns and fired on the group of three Norte'os, killing Martinez, Gillio said. Both sides of the altercation fled prior to police arriving and no one other than Martinez was injured during the altercation, police said. Witnesses said there were three Sure'o gang members involved in the fight.

Martinez' family members said he had been in Gilroy for only a week after getting out of jail and had plans to turn his life around.

They held a public vigil days after the killing that was marred by the outbreak of a fight. The killing also sparked what appeared to be a retaliatory drive-by shooting, for which two young men - Joshua Williams and Israel Juarez, both 19 - were sentenced to about four years in prison after they pleaded no contest to willfully discharging a firearm last month.

Police arrested Jimenez about 5:30 p.m. Thursday on the 700 block of El Cerrito Way during an ICE-led sweep of South County, Gillio said. Jimenez was sitting on the couch in the front room of the El Cerrito residence when the enforcement team knocked at the door. He was taken into custody without incident, Gillio said.

Another known gang member, Moises Cossio, 23, was arrested at the same location for probation violation but not in connection with the Martinez murder, Gillio said. The terms of Cossio's probation stipulated that he could not hang out with other gang members, Gillio said.

The ICE sweep netted a total of 17 foreign nationals with ties to violent street gangs in Morgan Hill, San Jose, San Martin and Gilroy. At least eight suspects were arrested in Gilroy. The sweep lasted all day Thursday and also involved the Gilroy and Morgan Hill police departments and the California Department of Justice Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement.

Despite one case where police had to force open an interior door to apprehend a suspect who was on probation and had outstanding warrants for burglary, "everything went very smoothly," Gillio said. "It was a great cooperative effort.

Gilroy police received Jimenez' no-bail murder warrant just hours before the scheduled ICE sweep and were relieved that it came in time, Gillio said.

"We knew the warrant would be coming," he said. "We were glad we were able to serve all the warrants at the same time. It made things run much more smoothly. It's satisfying to see this come to a conclusion."

Solarzano was arrested during a traffic stop on the side of Highway 25 in San Benito County just over the county line by Regional Auto Theft

Task Force agents. And Ashford was arrested at the Gilroy Police Department without incident after police brought her in for questioning.

"I give credit to Investigators (Jim) Callahan and (Michael) Bolton and Detective (Stan) Devlin," Gillio said. "They all worked well together and with outside agencies to bring this complicated case to a conclusion and take several dangerous gang members off the street."

### **What is provocative act murder rule?**

The provocative act murder rule allows the district attorney to charge someone with murder if they were involved in a crime that eventually led to someone's killing. The reasoning behind this is that the person committing the crime contributed to circumstances that provoked violence, and the person who was killed would not have been killed if not for the original crime.

*Source: Santa Clara County Office of the District Attorney*

### **Who was involved in the Nov. 11 altercation?**

Larry Martinez: Norte'o; 18; deceased

Angel Solarzano: Norte'o; 19; in police custody

Heather Ashford: Possible Norte'o; 18; in police custody

Unknown male: Suspected Norte'o; not in police custody

Cristian Giovanni Jimenez: Sure'o; 21; in police custody

Unknown male: Suspected Sure'o; not in police custody

Unknown male\*: Suspected Sure'o; not in police custody

*Source: Gilroy Police Department*

\* *According to witness statements*



Washington State Prison in Walla Walla

## **The Seattle Times**

# **State cuts prison violence by housing rival gang members in separate units**

State Department of Corrections officials say efforts to separate members of the rival gangs Norteños and Sureños have reduced violence behind bars.

By [Sharon Pian Chan](#)

*Seattle Times staff report*

**Feb. 4, 2009**

Worried about escalating gang violence behind bars, the state Department of Corrections last May began housing members of two rival Hispanic gangs known as the Norteños and Sureños in separate units.

Corrections officials say the approach has helped reduce violence.

"We decided we would do something different for two reasons: to make the place safer for staff members and inmates and to just normalize the prison environment so people can participate in jobs [training] and all the other things people do so people don't reoffend," said Dan Pacholke, deputy director of the prisons division for the Department of Corrections (DOC).

While known gang members make up 18 percent of the state's prison population of 18,000, they account for 43 percent of major violent incidents, said Chad Lewis, DOC spokesman. Several law-enforcement agencies in the state have focused on gang violence and, as a result, more gang members are entering the prison system.

The state's new approach starts at the reception facility in Shelton, Mason County, where male inmates enter the prison system. Corrections officers try to determine whether a new inmate has a gang affiliation. Some inmates identify themselves as members of a gang, and officials also look for signs such as tattoos.

The DOC said the gang with the most members in state prisons is the Crips with 2,385, followed by the Sureños with 1,773 and White Supremacists with 1,389. Norteños, who are fewer in number but better organized, and Sureños are responsible for most fights, the DOC said.

According to the 2009 National Gang Threat Assessment, released by the National Gang Intelligence Center and the National Drug Intelligence Center, as members of individual Hispanic street gangs enter prison, they put aside former rivalries with other Hispanic street gangs and unite under either the Sureños or the Norteños.

The original Mexican Mafia members, most of whom were from Southern California, considered Mexican Americans from the rural, agricultural areas of Northern California weak and viewed them with contempt. To distinguish themselves, members of the Mexican Mafia began to refer to the Hispanic gang members who worked for them as Sureños (Southerners). Inmates from Northern California became known as Norteños (Northerners) and are affiliated with the Nuestra Familia gang.

"There had been a pretty broad understanding that there were fight-on-sight orders between these two groups," Pacholke said. "The level of activity on assaults and fights was running really high, and rather than wait for something catastrophic to happen" the DOC decided to make changes.

Starting in the reception facility, corrections officers make sure members of rival gangs are not kept in the same holding areas. That change has led to a dramatic decrease in violence, Pacholke said. Getting into a fight while in reception can often trail inmates through their prison terms and lead to retaliatory violence, he said.

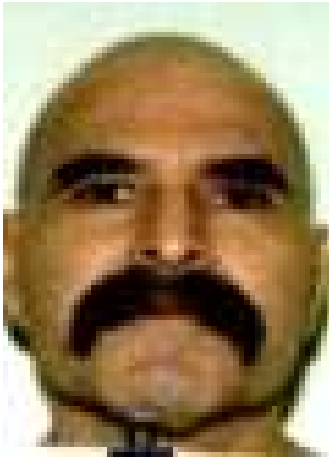
The changes extended to the maximum-security state penitentiary at Walla Walla. The state recently built several new units there, each holding fewer than 100 inmates. The units each have their own attached dining area and outdoor recreation yard.

"In a typical prison, where there's one dining hall where multiple [inmate] units might come in, you might have 1,000 inmates eating in one dining hall, which really lends itself to any one inmate bumping into a lot of people," Pacholke said.

The DOC hosted a media tour of the Walla Walla prison Tuesday to highlight the program.

Officials say violence in the state prison system fell by 200 incidents from 2007 to 2008, even as the prison population went up.

"If there's one violent act, there's likely to be two, and if there's two there's likely to be four, because of conflict generated or internal need to pay back," Pacholke said. "The sooner we can intervene and prevent it, it's a multiplier. We might not stop [just] one fight. We might stop two, might stop four."



**David "D.C." Cervantes (NF Top General)**

## **Authorities report new leadership, constitution for Nuestra Familia gang**

### **Authorities say Nuestra Familia's revisions mean more violence in streets**

By Julia Reynolds  
The Monterey County Herald

MONTEREY COUNTY, Calif. — Monterey County's deadliest gang has new leadership and a new constitution, forcing changes that law enforcement officers say is translating to increased violence in the streets.

After several years of upheaval -- stemming largely from the massive federal prosecution called Operation Black Widow -- the top leadership of the Nuestra Familia is once again firmly established.

For the first time in decades, one man sits alone at the helm of the criminal organization that for more than 30 years has called the shots for thousands of Norte-o gang members in the Salinas Valley.

In 2004, when the prison gang's top five leaders were transferred from California to a federal supermaximum prison in Florence, Colo., a struggle for the gang's top positions brewed in Pelican Bay State Prison in Crescent City, the Nuestra Familia's traditional

headquarters.

In the aftermath, some of the gang's thousands of Norte-o associates -- street-level soldiers who answer to Nuestra Familia -- stayed loyal to the exiled generals and captains, while others looked to Pelican Bay because the gang's written constitution said its leaders must reside there.

Three leaders soon emerged at Pelican Bay, filling the ranks of the gang's mesa, or board of directors: David "DC" Cervantes of Chino, Jose "Huerito" Gonzalez and James "Conejo" Perez.

But in a coup d'etat of sorts, Gonzalez and Perez have been "demoted" to "Category 1," the lowest level of the Nuestra Familia, investigators say.

That leaves Cervantes, who has always kept a keen eye on Salinas affairs, firmly in control as the organization's only general.

The next rung of leaders in Pelican Bay includes Daniel "Stork" Perez of Salinas; Anthony "Chuco" Guillen of San Jose, who was involved in the murder of a Nuestra Familia member there and is serving a 25-year sentence; and George "Puppet" Franco, 39, from San Jose, responsible for the gang's activities in Stockton, Tracy and Fresno.

Nuestra Familia is organized in a military-like hierarchy, with generals running the gang from inside prison and paroled regiment captains running the streets outside.

Last year, a newly revised constitution for the gang was distributed through underground channels, allowing for change in the mesa's structure, said Santa Cruz County sheriff's Sgt. Roy Morales. But copies were intercepted in Pelican Bay, giving investigators a heads-up about the leadership changes.

Like other major prison gangs, including the Aryan Brotherhood and the Mexican Mafia, Nuestra Familia issues orders from its power base in the Security Housing Unit of Pelican Bay. And though prison officials recently reorganized the housing in a way that slows down gang communications, coded directives are still smuggled out that translate to violence in California cities and farm towns.

One such order last year told Norte-os across Northern California to clean the streets of Sure-os.

Police surmise that the order was responsible for many of the shootings in Salinas in 2007, which increased by 50 percent over 2006 levels.

Now, nearly all Norte-o soldiers and Nuestra Familia regiment captains across California answer to Cervantes, gang experts say, but re-establishing the gang's control over the streets has not been easy.

"DC Cervantes is calling the shots," said J.R. Auten, a former gang investigator for state prisons and now a consultant for federal and state law enforcement. "He's trying to

regroup these guys. The Norte-os are trying to establish (in Salinas) but every time they try to, there's shootouts."

A small minority within the gang has not transferred loyalty to Cervantes, Santa Cruz County's Morales said.

"There's family members still loyal to the guys in the fed," he said, referring to the exiled former generals and captains in Colorado.

When the five were transferred out of California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger protested the fact that the five were not scattered across the federal prison system, as former U.S. Attorney Robert Mueller's staff had promised.

And the transfer led to internal power struggles played out in the streets, police say.

The five former leaders are James "Tibbs" Morado, 59, whose common-law wife, 20-year-old Salinas resident Crystal Nenque, was found slain on Hecker Pass Road near Watsonville in 2005; Joseph "Pinky" Hernandez, 58; Gerald "Cuete" Rubalcaba, 52; Cornelio Tristan, 46; and former Monterey resident Tex Marin Hernandez, 53.

Despite the governor's complaints, all five are still housed in the same supermax unit.

The gang's new constitution says the five should still be respected as former leaders, but has stripped them of their power in California.

What they will do within the federal prison remains to be seen, but investigators said stabbings have increased and communication with the outside has been established through cell phones smuggled into prison.

Nuestra Familia's new leadership General: David "DC" Cervantes Top Commanders: Daniel "Stork" Perez, of Salinas; Anthony "Chuco" Guillen, of San Jose; George "Puppet" Franco, of San Jose Demoted: Jose "Huerito" Gonzalez; James "Conejo" Perez



# San Francisco Chronicle

## S.F. shooting victim linked to Norteño gang

Jaxon Van Derbeken, Chronicle Staff Writer

Friday, September 26, 2008

A San Francisco man shot to death in Potrero Hill this week was believed to be a major figure in the Norteño street gang, authorities say, and was awaiting trial on local drug charges as well as federal weapons counts when he was killed.

Armando Jose Rodriguez, 32, was shot Tuesday at 1:48 p.m. as he was visiting someone near a food truck on Illinois Street between 24th and 25th streets, an industrial area.

The gunman shot Rodriguez several times, then ran down the block to a white Ford Mustang driven by another suspect, investigators said. Police have made no arrests and have given only a vague description of the killer.

Police sources said Rodriguez was a local leader in the Norteños and may have decided which of the gang's enemies would be targeted for violence. Police say they are gearing up in the Mission District and elsewhere for possible gang retaliatory attacks in response to his killing.

The Norteños, or northerners, are based in Northern California and have ties to the Nuestra Familia prison gang. Their main rivals, the Sureños, or southerners, were originally based in Southern California and grew out of another prison gang, the Mexican Mafia.

The Mission District, where the Norteños and Sureños are concentrated locally, has been the scene of eight homicides since the beginning of August. Police believe that several of those killings were the result of warfare among Latino gangs. After three men were

fatally shot the evening of Sept. 4, police increased the number of beat officers on Mission Street and added car patrols to other parts of the neighborhood.

Rodriguez, known as "Chappo," was free on bond stemming from a drug case filed last year, court records show. San Francisco narcotics officers and federal agents raided a home on Revere Street in May 2007, found a marijuana-growing operation and arrested Rodriguez and three other men.

Rodriguez's attorney in the case, John Runfola, had no comment Thursday about his client's slaying.

Around the time of the San Francisco raid, authorities searched a home in Vacaville where Rodriguez was living with his wife. Offices allegedly found a gun there, prompting federal prosecutors to file charges against him.

Rodriguez could have been sentenced to 10 years in prison under federal law had he been found guilty of being a felon in possession of a firearm. He had a felony accessory conviction stemming from a 2001 bar fight and stabbing on Cortland Avenue, police said.

That case was originally charged as an attempted murder, but was resolved with the lesser charge.

Rodriguez also had a conviction for being a felon in possession of ammunition, records show. That felony charge grew out of the May 2007 raids in San Francisco and Vacaville.

Members of Rodriguez's family have declined to talk about his killing. His defense lawyer in the federal case, Randy Montesano, said Rodriguez had jobs and was married, with children, and was never accused in court of being associated with any gang.

Montesano called the federal weapons case against Rodriguez "marginal," saying his client did not have the long felony rap sheet typical of people charged under the weapons possession law.

He called Rodriguez a "stand-up guy" who was "very respectful, polite, courteous."

"It's unbelievable," Montesano said of Rodriguez's killing. "I don't know whether he got caught up in something."



**Robert Patrick Hanrahan (Former Salinas NF regiment leader)**

## **Gang leader took unusual route to the top**

[Monterey County Herald](#) | February 19, 2008 Tuesday  
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**By JULIA REYNOLDS Herald Salinas Bureau**

**To the young gangsters** slinging heroin in Chinatown, he was always known as Bubba.

Robert Patrick Hanrahan, 36, had an unlikely trajectory within the Nuestra Familia gang.

The "crew" members working under Hanrahan said he didn't speak Spanish and wasn't even Mexican-American. But gang members know the Nuestra Familia as an equal opportunity employer to members who are loyal and put in work.

Hanrahan by his own admission already had a long career with the Nuestra Familia and its Norteno gang offshoots when he was sentenced to 13 years in prison last April on drug and gang charges.

His name came to light last week through his romantic involvement with Sara Gracia, whose appointment to the Salinas police advisory commission sparked a controversy that led to Gracia's withdrawal. (See story on page 1).

Hanrahan has been in and out of state prison since a 1993 robbery and drug sales conviction, and for the next seven years, solidified his relationship with the Nuestra Familia. But it was a prison stint in 2000 that netted him a big promotion within the gang.

According to FBI documents, when Hanrahan was paroled in 2001 he came home with a letter from Salinas gang captain Daniel "Stork" Perez in Pelican Bay State Prison.

### **Leader in Salinas|**

The document put Hanrahan in charge of Nuestra Familia's Salinas regiment, one of the gang's most coveted positions.

But Hanrahan's reign over the city was cut short when a gang leader demoted him, replacing him with Armando Santa Cruz of East Salinas. Hanrahan's former crew members complained that the new boss, Santa Cruz, wouldn't let them party like Bubba did, preferring the military-style discipline Nuestra Familia is known for.

Hanrahan soon went back to prison and, some would say, caught a lucky break the gang leader who demoted him turned out to be an FBI informant.

In 2001, his former crew members and Santa Cruz were all swept up in federal and state gang conspiracy cases. Santa Cruz got 20 years in federal prison, and dozens of others were sent away for life.

When he was paroled again in 2003, court records show Hanrahan took up again with gangsters in Salinas and Watsonville, and from 2004-07 he was one of dozens of Nuestra Familia members and associates who fell under the competing lenses of federal and local law enforcement as each faction vied to make its own conspiracy bust.

Among those under the microscope in Salinas were Hanrahan; Larry "Paqui" Amaro, known as Hanrahan's mentor; and Gabriel Caracheo, a longtime associate and the brother of Hanrahan's off-again, on-again girlfriend Sara Gracia.

In Castroville, law enforcement officials were also eyeing a paroled Nuestra Familia associate named Mario Diaz. While on parole, Diaz skipped town, later surfacing in Los Banos, where he opened a clothing store that federal agents say was a front for the gang's drug operations.

### **Search warrants|**

Salinas police rushed to execute search warrants and make arrests as prosecutors waited, eager to nail the whole bunch in court.

But there was a conflict: to federal agents sniffing around the same turf, it was more convenient for Amaro to stay free while the FBI built a case against what they called the Mario Diaz Drug Trafficking Organization, aided by a wired informant and hundreds of wiretapped telephone conversations.

Between federal and local law enforcement, there was a brief but uncomfortable period of bad communication and stepping on each other's toes as the two factions pursued the same men.

In August 2004, Salinas officers obtained a search warrant and raided a house where they found Hanrahan and another girlfriend, Leticia Salcido, asleep on the floor.

In the room were more than two pounds of crystal methamphetamine, three-quarters of a pound of cocaine, pagers, cell phones, ledger sheets, two digital scales, empty plastic baggies, a stolen .40 caliber semi-automatic handgun, a 12-gauge shotgun and a Russian rifle.

### **Cash in pants pocket|**

Detectives said a wide-angle surveillance camera was mounted outside the house. A pair of men's pants found next to Hanrahan had \$4,645 in cash in the pocket. Inside a safe were Nuestra Familia documents listing the names of gang members in various regions of California.

Hanrahan posted bail so quickly officials couldn't request a denial before he hit the streets.

The trial was postponed and in March 2006, Hanrahan failed to appear in court. It didn't take long for the court to declare him a fugitive.

Rumors flew around Salinas and in the prisons: Was Bubba dead? Hiding in Tijuana? Was he working for the Arellano-Felix Cartel? Other rumors placed him in Las Vegas because Hanrahan was known to love boxing.

Acting on a tip, agents learned he was indeed alive. They apprehended him in November 2006 at the San Ysidro border crossing, on the U.S. side facing Tijuana. Officials did not say which way he was headed.

He pleaded guilty to gang and drug charges and was sentenced to 13 years. A few months later, Amaro and Caracheo were arrested and indicted in a huge federal drug conspiracy case dubbed Operation Valley Star that will play out in the Eastern District Court of California over the next few years.

Once again, Hanrahan had narrowly missed being swept up in a federal conspiracy case.

Under federal sentencing laws, Caracheo, Amaro and more than a dozen others in that case now face the possibility of life in prison.

### **Salinas regiment in chaos**

With Amaro and Hanrahan out of the picture, gang investigators say the Salinas regiment of the Nuestra Familia is now in chaos.

"There's no clear leadership in the Central Coast," said Santa Cruz County sheriff's Sgt. Roy Morales, who has investigated the gang for years.

"There are no new guys" filling the space left by Amaro's group, he said. "Now's the time for law enforcement to really pay attention."

In fact, the Nuestra Familia is undergoing power struggles at all levels across the state.

Besides reeling from the loss of its top street operators, the gang has been hurt by an unprecedented number of defectors as prisons across the state are setting up protective custody yards for gang members who profess to give up the life.

Hanrahan is not among them. He is currently in state prison in Tehachapi.

As a validated member of the gang, corrections officials say he will soon be transferred to Pelican Bay Prison, where Nuestra Familia leaders run the organization's business from the maximum-security unit.

## **Gang sweep nets 22 arrests**

**Nuestra Familia probe includes Monterey County**

[Monterey County Herald](#) | June 29, 2007 Friday

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**By JULIA REYNOLDS Herald Salinas Bureau**

**Several Salinas-area Nuestra Familia** gang associates whom federal agents have been watching for years were among the nearly two dozen people arrested during statewide sweeps Wednesday, said the FBI.

Court and law enforcement documents show that several of those arrested have been under the lens of federal investigators for years, some stretching back to the late 1990s.

But officials provided few details Thursday regarding 22 arrests of alleged Nuestra Familia associates in raids that spanned 15 cities, five counties and three states.

The roundup was part of "Operation Valley Star," a federally funded, multiyear, multijurisdictional investigation targeting the Nuestra Familia gang's street operations.

Among those arrested who have long been under the watch of federal agents and local police were former Salinas residents Larry "Paqui" Amaro, 40, who recently moved to Hanford in Fresno County, and Ernest Paul Killinger, 29, of Orangevale, whom Salinas police believe had ties to Nuestra Familia drug dealers in the city in 2001.

According to internal FBI documents obtained by The Herald, Amaro has been watched by the FBI since the days of the bureau's massive Operation Black Widow, an investigation that spanned from 1997 to 2004. That effort resulted in guilty pleas from nearly two dozen of the gang's top-echelon leaders by 2004.

In an August 1999 FBI internal report, federal agents said "Amaro had orders to kill" a Salinas gang member, who was later attacked several times but survived. The order allegedly came from a top Nuestra Familia leader, Gerald Rubalcaba.

The FBI report also said Amaro had passed along orders to kill a Salinas anti-gang counselor whose name appeared on a hit list.

In addition, FBI agents reported that in February of the same year, Amaro himself had fallen into the gang's bad graces.

### **Death order rescinded|**

The report said high-level Nuestra Familia members had orders to "hit" Amaro while he was in Pelican Bay State Prison because of a leadership dispute, but those orders were apparently later rescinded.

Recently, Amaro was being watched because he was a documented Nuestra Familia associate who allegedly kept close ties to major Nuestra Familia players in the Salinas area, said gang investigators and FBI reports.

Salinas police detectives have also kept a close eye on Amaro, a longtime resident of the city, before he moved to Hanford this year.

Officers believed Amaro was keeping a low profile while still serving as a channel between the gang's street regiment and leaders in Pelican Bay State Prison, where the Nuestra Familia keeps its headquarters.

FBI agents and local law enforcement officers released names of those arrested but provided few other details Thursday morning about the raids that took place the day before.

Four people were picked up in Monterey County: Salinas' Manuel Samora Cadena, 54, and Gerardo Lopez Mora, 30, and Castroville's Oscar Padilla, 26, and Richard Mendoza Jr., 23.

They were all taken into federal custody on drug-related charges, although authorities did not supply details of their alleged crimes.

Still being sought on arrest warrants are Robert Javier Farias Portela, 24, of Salinas, and Faustino Gonzales Jr., 29, of Greenfield.

All six are known Norteño gang members or associates connected to the Nuestra Familia, asaid law enforcement officials.

Three more arrests were made in the Bay Area, including San Francisco, Petaluma and Fremont. The FBI also pursued related warrants out of its St. Louis and Memphis, Tenn. offices, said Special Agent Joseph Schadler.

### **Coordinated effort**

More than 200 law enforcement officers from the FBI, the Monterey County Sheriff's Office, Salinas and Marina police, and other local law enforcement agencies participated in the Monterey County portion of the raid.

Sheriff Mike Kanalakis said the massive coordination of federal and local law enforcement officers in the investigation and the raid was the key to the success of the operation.

"A lot of times, it seems there is no end in sight to the gang problem and that law enforcement is just sitting around, but an investigation like this takes a long time to develop," Kanalakis said.

"In the end, a lot of people were put away. The investigation resulted in the arrests of a lot of people who will hopefully do a lot of time. Time will tell how effective this action was."

FBI assistant special agent David Johnson said additional charges could be forthcoming. Johnson said the operation "highlights the need for interagency cooperation" on investigations involving sophisticated criminal gangs.

Authorities declined to offer further details about the arrests and investigation, which is ongoing, citing confidentiality concerns.

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### **Suspects identified**

Names of those arrested during this week's statewide sweep targeting the Nuestra Familia gang's street operations:

Oscar Campos Padilla, 26, Castroville  
Manuel Cadena, 54, Salinas  
Richard Mendoza, 23, Castroville  
Gerardo Mora, 30, Salinas  
Larry Amaro, 40, Hanford  
Andrea Cadena, 29  
Valdemar Cambunga, 49, Los Banos  
Jesse Corral, 35, Stockton  
Edward Fuentes, 35, Merced  
Jesus Garcia, 34, Stockton  
Alvaro Gomez, 35, Los Banos  
Marco Gomez, 28  
Jason Stewart-Hanson, 33, Los Banos  
Ernest Paul Killinger, 29, Orangevale  
Bismark Martin Ocampo, 37, Petaluma  
David Ramirez, 27, Manteca  
Benjamin Santoscastro, 31, San Francisco  
Ernesto Salcedo, 36, Stockton  
Rebeca Salcedo, 41, Stockton  
Leo Torres, 35, Dos Palos  
Fernando Villalpando, 37, Moreno Valley  
Jose Villasenor, 32, Fremont

Apprehended later:

Robert Javier Farias Portela, 24, Salinas  
Faustino Gonzales Jr., 29, Greenfield  
Gabriel Caracheo, 33, Salinas

## **A history of colors**

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BY DAVID CASTELLON • VISALIA TIMES-DELTA STAFF WRITER • MAY 12, 2007

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The gang colors red and dark blue originated in the most ordinary way. They were the only bandanna colors sold in California prisons.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the Mexican Mafia — or "EME" — a southern gang, was the predominant gang in , said Tulare County Sheriff's Sgt. Kevin Cotton, supervisor of the county's Multi-Agency Gang Enforcement Teams.

As large numbers of northern gang members filtered into the prison system, they for self protection, creating La Nuestra Familia gang. To identify themselves, the gangs used bandannas purchased in prison commissaries. They came in two colors, red and dark blue.

The northerners chose red, and the southerners, in turn, began purchasing the blue bandannas, Cotton said.

Crips and Bloods, largely African-American gangs from Los Angeles, also began identifying themselves with the prisons' colored bandannas, with the Bloods choosing red and the Crips blue.

Since then, the color system, as well as the deadly rivalry between the northern and southern gangs, has made its way to the street and evolved. Now, gang members display their colors not just with bandannas but also with clothing, even jewelry.

Some have even adopted different colors.

For example, said Tulare County sheriff's Detective Joe Aguilar, a gang unit deputy who also serves as the Sheriff's gang liaison to schools, some northern gang members have begun wearing silver-and-black Raider shirts and other team gear, a nod to their gang's Northern California roots.

"We're starting to see the white bandannas and black bandannas," Cotton said. "White seems to be among some separate 'cliques' of Hispanic gangs, though they tend to ally with north or south."



# Slain woman was wife of gang leader

**Nuestra Familia internal conflict possible motive**

[Monterey County Herald](#) | February 8, 2005

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**By JULIA REYNOLDS and GEORGE B. SANCHEZ**  
**Herald Staff Writers**

**A 20-year-old Salinas woman found shot to death** on a remote road near Gilroy on Monday was the wife of a top "general" of the Nuestra Familia prison gang, The Monterey County Herald learned Friday.

Crystal Ann Morado, whose maiden name was Nenque, married the notorious gang leader James "Tibbs" Morado, 57, sometime in the past year and a half while he awaited federal trial on criminal racketeering charges in a special Alameda County Jail facility.

Investigators said the killing could signal a larger power struggle within the gang after it was shaken to its roots by the far-reaching federal prosecution.

Crystal Morado's body was found in her vehicle Monday morning on Hecker Pass Road in southern Santa Clara County. A commercial trucker discovered Morado's body with blood on it, slumped over the steering wheel of her car, when he stopped to check her vehicle. He had noticed it hadn't moved in the hour since he first passed it going the other way. The lights were on and the engine was running.

James Morado is an admitted member of the gang's "Mesa," or governing board of several generals, and some law enforcement officials believe he was the ringleader of the Mesa before he was indicted in 2001 in what has been called the U.S. Justice Department's longest and costliest gang prosecution.

All of the defendants in that case eventually pleaded guilty, and in September, Morado, along with fellow Nuestra Familia leaders Gerald Rubalcaba, Cornelio Tristan, Tex Hernandez and Joseph Hernandez, agreed to life in federal custody. All were serving life sentences in California prisons for earlier crimes. Once Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger grants clemency, their federal sentencing can take place.

Morado has been serving a life sentence in state prison since 1977 for murder and robbery. He became a leader of the powerful Nuestra Familia gang, which ran its operations out of the maximum security section of Pelican Bay Prison. Law enforcement officials estimate that the gang is responsible for more than 600 murders in California since it formed in the state's prisons in the 1960s.

Crystal Morado had had recent scrapes with the law in Salinas. In September, she was sentenced to 25 days in jail and placed on three years' probation for a July hit-and-run conviction. In late November, she was charged with misdemeanor theft and failed to appear at a Dec. 9 court date. Judge José Velásquez issued a bench warrant for her arrest.

Sgt. Dean Baker of the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Department said investigators still don't know how or exactly when Crystal married James Morado. Records at the Alameda County Jail, where Morado is being held in a special maximum-security cell with other Nuestra Familia leaders while they await federal sentencing, show Crystal Morado listed as a visitor.

"She was also visiting a young man in Monterey County Jail in recent months," Baker said.

A source close to the family said the marriage took place in the past 18 months and that some family members were worried about Crystal Morado's involvement with "the wrong crowd."

The Santa Clara County Sheriff's office is in charge of the murder investigation, and Baker said his investigators have spoken with police in Salinas, Santa Cruz and Watsonville, as well as with the FBI. Sheriff's investigators have been following leads.

"We have gotten maybe three to four hours' sleep a night since Monday," Baker said.

Investigators are considering four possible motives for the case, including a random carjacking attempt, a jealous boyfriend, a rival gang attack or internal strife within the Nuestra Familia. The intense level of attention to the case may indicate concerns over the dangerous implications of the latter motive.

"There might be a power struggle going on," Baker said. "At this point, everybody in (Morado's) organization is a suspect."

### **Internal struggle**

The Nuestra Familia organization has been undergoing an internal struggle at its top level since the federal case began.

A gang investigator in the California Department of Corrections said that before the Mesa members were indicted in 2001, they appointed a temporary group of leaders to run the gang's operations out of Pelican Bay in anticipation of the federal case.

The investigator said that prison investigators intercepted communications from the Mesa proposing that the Pelican Bay group continue to run California operations while the Mesa would expand operations into the federal prison system.

That proposal was not accepted by the Pelican Bay group, the investigator said, which is now at odds with the Mesa over who has ultimate control of the gang.

The defendants' upcoming sentencing has taken longer than expected because of "technicalities," according to a U.S. Attorney's office spokesman.

The multi-agency, multimillion-dollar prosecution started in 2000 with the indictment of Salinas Nuestra Familia members Hector Gallegos, Caesar Ramírez, Rico García and others by U.S. Attorney Robert Mueller, now director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The case resulted from Operation Black Widow, a controversial investigation that began in 1997 and aimed to break the leadership of the Nuestra Familia, the notorious prison gang with extensive operations in Salinas.

By 2001, Morado and 21 other members and associates of the Nuestra Familia were indicted on more than 30 charges, including murder, racketeering, assault, drug trafficking and conspiracy. It was the last major investigation led by Mueller before he was picked to head the FBI.

The FBI was the lead investigative agency in the operation that involved nearly 30 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, including the Monterey County District Attorney's Office and Salinas police. Seventy-five people have been prosecuted as part of Operation Black Widow and spin-off state and federal prosecutions, according to Assistant U.S. Attorney Steven Gruel in San Francisco.

A woman who identified herself as a close friend of Crystal Morado, and who

asked not to be identified, said she was shocked to hear about Crystal's death. The family friend, who knew Crystal as a child, said the young girl was not known to be affiliated with any gang and that she came from a very supportive, hard-working Salinas family.

Crystal Morado attended the New Life Church of the Nazarene in Salinas in recent years. The Rev. Tim King said the church will take up a collection at its 10:30 a.m. Sunday service to help offset funeral costs.

Services for Crystal Morado are planned for 10 a.m. Monday at Healey Mortuary Chapel in Salinas.



## **BLOOD BROTHERS-The killing started when Nuestra Familia gang leaders felt their influence in San Jose waning, prosecutors say -- but the dead were all their own**

**Maria Alicia Gaura, Chronicle Staff Writer**

Sunday, June 29, 1997

When the bullet-torn bodies started turning up on the streets and playing fields of San Jose, it was quickly obvious that a gang war had broken out. But this was a rivalry with a twist.

This was not a war between competing gangs, police realized. Instead, prosecutors say, the 10 victims were executed by their own underworld friends and ``family" in a misguided campaign to revitalize the Nuestra Familia prison gang in San Jose.

On a practical level, the three- year murder spree that began in 1990 has resulted in the costliest series of trials in Santa Clara County history. County officials say they have spent \$10 million so far, and the expenses continue to mount.

But the trials have also provided an intimate, through-the-looking- glass view into a shadowy American subculture.

According to mountains of court files and the gang members themselves, the much-vaunted ``family" at the heart of Nuestra Familia is a profoundly dysfunctional one -- a soap opera tangle of duplicity, adultery, drugs and betrayal.

Behind the rhetoric of racial pride lurks the constant threat of sudden death, and not from a stranger's hand.

``All of this `High Noon' playing around just littered the streets with bodies," said Deputy District Attorney Catherine ``Kitty" Constantinides. ``They killed their own. It was an idiotic way of doing crime."

Nuestra Familia -- ``Our Family" in Spanish -- has been a burr in the tail of law enforcement since 1968, when, as myth has it, the organization sprang to life in the exercise yard at San Quentin. All Nuestra Familia recruits are told of the day when an unnamed Latino inmate's shoes were stolen by a member of the Mexican Mafia, the prison gang whose roots twine deep in the barrios of East Los Angeles.

As the thief brazenly walked the yard in his stolen shoes, the victim and his Northern California friends rose up and fought. What happened then is unclear; no one knows the fate of the disputed shoes. But the rivalry between North and South reportedly began that day, and a paradoxical blend of racial pride and hatred of other Mexican Americans has sustained both factions ever since.

In the 1980s, as the NF grew, it set up a farm team called the Northern Structure, or Nuestra Raza. Both the Familia and the Structure claim the color red, the number 14, the symbol of the Northern Star. Members swear fealty to the gang and vow to uphold the ``14 Bonds," which mandate secrecy, obedience and respect within the gang.

But given the amount of double- dealing on the part of almost everyone involved, it's a mystery why the familianos trusted each other at all.

The San Jose spate of killings was allegedly set in motion on April 19, 1990, when Louie ``Dumptruck" Chavez was paroled from Pelican Bay State Prison carrying a hit list allegedly drawn up behind bars by the Mesa, the Nuestra Familia's ruling council.

But the first thing Chavez did with the hit list was to quietly slip it to his parole officer, prosecutors say. They claim the bloodletting didn't begin for several months, not until Bobby ``Silent" Lopez and Ronald ``Lucky" Shelton were paroled and meshed their murderous energies in an attempt to assert control.

Shelton was commander of the NF's San Jose regiment, and Lopez his newly minted second-in-command, prosecutors say.

The main Nuestra Familia trial now under way involves four defendants accused of seven murders, conspiracy and assorted violent attacks. Defendants Bobby Lopez, James ``Huevo" Trujeque and Herminio ``Spanky" Serna all face the death penalty. Co-defendant Eddie ``Pajaro" Vargas faces life in prison.

There appears to be little love lost between the four defendants. According to court records, Lopez once ordered a ``green light," or hit, on Vargas. Trujeque was once kidnapped and roughed up by fellow gang members who suspected him of not attending to gang business.

The defendants are accused of killing Tony ``Little Weasel" Herrera, Larry Valles and Esteban Guzman, alleged drug dealers who reportedly balked at paying taxes to the gang; Eli Rosas, said to have ``disrespected" other gang members; Marcos Baca, thought to be a snitch, whose body was found on the grounds of Santee Elementary School; and Ray ``Chocolate" Perez, a gang wannabe who may have made the mistake of breaking gang rules.

The seventh victim to die, Sheila Apodaca, was allegedly killed on the orders of her boyfriend -- Bobby Lopez -- because she furiously objected to his womanizing and threatened to retaliate. According to prosecutors, the order to kill Apodaca was placed by phone from the fourth floor of the county jail, where Lopez was being held on other charges.

Public interest has fallen off in the years since the murders, and the life-and-death courtroom drama now plays itself out in front of Superior Court Judge Kevin Murphy, the jury and a nearly empty house.

In addition to the defendants, whose ankles are shackled to bolts in the courtroom floor, the cast includes seven defense lawyers -- two apiece for the death penalty defendants and one for Vargas; Kitty Constantinides and her husband and co- counsel, Deputy District Attorney Charles Constantinides; and four or five armed and watchful bailiffs.

Despite the fact that they are facing -- at the least -- a life behind bars, the defendants seem to bask in the perverse prestige of their dangerous-gangster roles. Everything about this trial had to be done specially, from the remodeled courtroom, with a special glassed-in platform for two of the defendants, to the police snipers on the courthouse roof to the made-to-order cells in the county jail's Security Housing Unit.

Serna resembles nothing so much as a wide-eyed college student, and Trujeque could be a portly businessman -- except for the metal anklet above his black loafers. Vargas, with his facial tattoos and street- tough expression, for a while wore his jail jumpsuit to trial. But now he's softened his approach with preppy turtleneck shirts and slacks.

With his androgynous good looks and slender physique, Lopez hardly looks the lethal Romeo who prosecutors say ordered his lover shot, gunned down two men and, after being mistakenly released from San Quentin, was arrested after a high- speed chase that forced another car off a Fresno overpass.

He looks keenly at everyone who enters or leaves the courtroom, though spectators are warned not to look back, because communication with the accused is strictly forbidden. Early in the trial, one female reporter was hustled out of the room and threatened with arrest when a bailiff mistakenly accused her of smiling and nodding at a defendant.

The nickname "Silent" is a kind of joke, prosecutors say, because Lopez is famous for talking too much.

"He can't help himself," said Charles Constantinides. "Were it not for Lopez and his big mouth, law enforcement would have had a much harder time solving this case."

The families of the victims are noticeably absent from the courtroom. Some of the victims had no close family or had destroyed their family ties through drug use and criminal activity.

Some, like Sheila Apodaca's family, live too far away to follow the case, and assumed it had been resolved years ago.

"Is that trial still going on? We thought maybe (Lopez) was getting out of prison by now," said one relative who asked not to be named.

A pretty girl with lustrous brown hair, Sheila Apodaca had lived all her life in the tiny Central Valley town of San Lorenzo before she hooked up with Bobby Lopez and moved to San Jose. Lopez had arrived in San Lorenzo as a teenager, and quickly made a reputation as a heartless tough guy. Sheila's family disapproved of the match, and was relieved when she called home to say she was coming back.

The next thing her family knew, she was dead, shot execution-style in the back of the head on a San Jose street. She was 21 when she died.

"It was a blow to the whole community," said her relative. "When they had the funeral, it was terrible. In a small town like this, you remain close, in touch, even when you haven't seen each other in years."

Another of the bitter legacies of Sheila Apodaca's murder is that her son, now 9 years old, is growing up an orphan -- his father died several years ago -- in the same small town as one of Bobby Lopez's sons. (Lopez has two sons, born one month apart, by different women.)

"It's so sad to see those two kids here at the youth center, and to wonder what they must think," said the relative. "I'm sure they know everything."

The indictments against the Nuestra Familia, released in 1992, charged 21 defendants with plotting and committing six murders. Thirteen of the defendants faced the death penalty.

The first arrests were followed by even more killings, as hits were allegedly ordered by gangsters in jail and the members who remained on the street battled for position.

Today, nearly seven years after the corpse of the first victim was found, two defendants have been convicted of murder in separate trials, and a third was convicted of trying to kill a fellow inmate in the Santa Clara County jail.

In addition to the trial in Murphy's courtroom, which began in January and was set to go to the jury last week, another two trials with six defendants are under way just upstairs. Two more trials with one defendant apiece are still pending. Of those who may yet be convicted, nine now face death.

Another nine of the original 21 defendants have turned state's evidence -- including Vincent "Chente" Arroyo, the gang's reputed general, and Ronald Shelton.

Arroyo and Shelton avoided the death penalty by pleading guilty to murders and agreeing to testify against their former soldiers. Arroyo is serving 20-to-life; Shelton got 25- to-life for each of the four murders he confessed to.

"At first, when (gang members) would come to our side, we'd throw a party," said Kitty Constantinides. "But now they come to us, and we think, 'Well, how much use are you going to be to us?' We've turned a lot of people down."

The defendants' unseemly scramble to turn coat not only made the cases easier to prosecute -- it began what law enforcement hopes may be the unraveling of the gang itself.

"The gangsters who remain are becoming very paranoid," said Charles Constantinides. "They profess such loyalty to the gang, such life-and-death devotion, they never thought their leaders would turn them in."

Attorney Guerin Provini, who represents Bobby Lopez, chafes at the unfairness of cutting deals with the gang leaders, then using their testimony in seeking the death penalty against "the Munchkins."

Turncoat and quadruple murderer "Lucky" Shelton, for instance, has been referred to even by the prosecution as a "homicidal maniac."

"I guess a homicidal maniac could be telling the truth," said Provini. "But in terms of being responsible for causing these deaths, he's probably the central figure."

"My guy has never been shown to be the triggerman, just a loudmouth who hasn't done much except write a lot of letters and blow off lots of steam."

Letters between the defendants, dozens of them, are a cornerstone of the prosecution's case. Thanks to frequent stretches in custody -- and occasional 10,000-word essays assigned by gang leaders -- the art of the handwritten letter flourishes in Nuestra Familia.

Penned in a Spanish-English patois and carefully worded, the letters reflect the cat-and-mouse game between inmates and "the landlord" who photocopies incoming and outgoing mail.

In the letters, the writers often assume women's names, substituting Rhonda for Ron, for instance. Loyalty between the men is expressed by phrases such as "Yes, love" and "I loves you too much." The pages are decorated with tiny whimsical faces.

But prosecutors say the coded messages were far from playful, serving to order hits and announce the results.

One week after "Little Weasel" Herrera was killed, prosecutors say, Lopez penned a coded letter to the leadership at Pelican Bay State Prison in which every fourth word after punctuation relayed the message. The message, according to this code, was "little ... weasel ... is ... peddling ... daisys."

After receiving a letter warning him that Sheila Apodaca was "involving you in the recent homicide on two well-known vatos" and "needed to be put in check," Lopez replied:

"In response to your most welcomed and vital message . . . I was already aware of the situation but didn't figure on the cancer spreading out so wide?! However, gracia again and just maybe in the near future we can show you our appreciation in some form or fashion."

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Among the questionable witnesses cited by the defense is Jerry Salazar, nicknamed "Cripple Jerry" by his former brothers. Salazar, who has traveled by wheelchair since a car accident 14 years ago, now prefers a new moniker -- "Hot Wheels."

A Northern Structure member who has admitted to setting up Sheila Apodaca and shooting down "Chocolate" Perez, Salazar was a passenger in Lopez's car during the high-speed chase in Fresno.

In an interview between sessions in the witness box, Salazar said he turned state's evidence to avoid the death penalty, turn his life around and end four years of solitary confinement. He admits that the details of his former life -- and the tattoos covering his arms, chest, neck and face -- probably didn't impress the jury when he testified against his former friends in Murphy's courtroom.

He got the tattoos "because I wanted the notoriety," he said. "I wanted them to notice the wheelchair less, and notice me more."

On an average day on the street, "I'd get up at 10 or 11 and go party," Salazar said. "We'd go see what we could find as far as drug connections to rob, we'd look for people to kill. In the summer of 1991, that came up a few times."

Unlike most of his gang associates, Salazar had skills to make a living in Silicon Valley. He worked for high-tech firms and a medical equipment company until his wife got pregnant by a fellow gang member, and then his life nose-dived into depression, drugs and violence.

Having sex with another gang member's woman is strictly against the 14 Bonds. So is drug use. But "Everybody did it," Salazar shrugged. "Especially drugs."

With a plea-bargained sentence of 25 to life, Salazar expects to die in prison. Paraplegics have a shorter-than-average life spans, and a gang snitch paraplegic in state prison faces even greater risks. But he was determined to repudiate the gang.

"At one point, I really did believe in the Northern Structure and Nuestra Familia," Salazar said. "We were outnumbered, and we needed unity."

"But we didn't go out and kill enemies, we went and killed ourselves. I realized that at some point, after Sheila got killed," Salazar said. "Bobby said he did love her, but as it says in the bonds, you gotta put the NF first, and so he called the hit. And after they call a hit, you gotta do it."

Yet even ex-gangsters like Salazar have trouble explaining their devotion to Nuestra Familia.

“There is a philosophical component to the Nuestra Familia. It's something like: The Mafia meets the Branch Davidians,” said Deputy District Attorney Cameron Bowman, whose double-murder trial of four NF defendants began this month. “They like to talk about ‘the struggle’ or ‘the cause,’ but who are they killing? It's other Hispanics.”

Nuestra Familia is one of a constellation of race-based prison gangs that organize and direct the growing subculture of California's inmates. As the prison population has exploded in the past decade, so has the influence of the gangs.

The Mexican Mafia, referred to as La Eme (the Spanish pronunciation for the letter M), is undisputedly at the top of the gang roster, with the most members, affiliates and turf in California. Nuestra Familia, which claims San Jose as its home turf, is second in influence.

State prison gang experts also include the Aryan Brotherhood, the Black Guerrilla Family and the Texas Syndicate on the list of current prison gangs in California. The Vanguard prison gang was recently demoted to the status of a mere “disruptive group” by corrections officials.

When compared with the enormous growth of California's prison industry, the effect of the Nuestra Familia trials in San Jose -- and a recent federal prosecution of the Mexican Mafia -- are hard to measure. Brian Parry, head of the Special Services gang unit for the state Department of Corrections, says that big prosecutions are often followed by a flurry of gang activity, as the second-string thugs compete for the vacant positions.

But Charles Constantinides points to San Jose's unusually low violent crime rate as proof that prosecutions have an effect. According to the FBI, San Jose had the lowest murder rate of any big city in the United States in 1996.

“San Jose wasn't such a low-crime area before we began this prosecution,” Constantinides said. “The murder rate dropped by about half.”

The Constantinideses and some gang experts are confident that Nuestra Familia is on the ropes. Because of the “three strikes” initiative, gang members are going to prison for life at younger and younger ages. This makes gang recruitment a harder sell.

But on a more fundamental level, the NF is dying because today's gangsters are simply of poorer quality than in the past, said Kitty Constantinides.

“In the '50s and '60s, the gang leaders had been in the military, they had some discipline,” she said. “They had some very good leadership, and bright-line rules that you didn't cross. No heroin, for instance, because it makes you lazy.”

“They were not the kind of guys who would have killed Sheila Apodaca.”