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Awaiting Answers About Fatal Day

Frustration builds after months of investigation of an Anaheim bust in which police killed one and wounded his friend.

By H.G. REZA
Times Staff Writer

Frank Carrillo was someone who could go to the store for his mother and find trouble on the way. His friend Oscar Mendez had the same sort of poor luck. He had been paralyzed in a gang shooting and smoked dope to forget his disability.

One afternoon in April they arranged to meet up with a drug dealer in an Anaheim alley and buy a half-ounce of pot for \$45. They cruised over in Carrillo's Chevy S-10 pickup. Mendez buckled himself in the passenger seat, his wheelchair tossed in the back.

"We're stoners together," said Mendez, 25. "Any time we go out, it was either to get something to eat or buy" marijuana.

The dope buy went south when a pair of cops pulled down the alley in their cruiser. What happened next was chaotic. When it was all over, Carrillo, 28, was dead and Mendez was wounded, again.

Police said one of the officers opened fire when Carrillo tried to run him down

with his pickup. A .45-caliber handgun was found at the scene.

The shooting remains under investigation by the Orange County district attorney's office, which investigates officer-involved incidents. The lengthy review has left Mendez, who disputed the police account of the shooting, and Carrillo's family suspicious and angry. Mendez, and Alfred and Maria Vega of Santa Ana, Carrillo's grandparents, filed a \$75-million claim against the city in September on grounds that the shooting resulted from police negligence. It was rejected by the Anaheim City Council on Oct. 11. A claim is often a precursor to a lawsuit.

Mendez, of Orange, said the legal effort was as much about getting information as money.

"Suing them isn't going to bring Frankie back," he said. "But it's been six months, and the district attorney is still investigating, and nobody's getting any answers."

Why, Mendez says he wants to know, was he interviewed by authorities for only 10 minutes, and even then right after he was wheeled out of surgery? And where did the handgun found on the ground next to Carrillo's truck come from? He says it did not belong to him or his friend.

Deputy Dist. Atty. Susan Kang Schroeder, a spokeswoman for the district

[See Shooting, Page B6]



CLOSE: Carrillo's mother, Debra Valadez, died the day after he did. Carrillo's grandparents and Oscar Mendez have filed a \$75-million claim.

Injured Man Awaits Results of Inquiry

[Shooting, from Page B1] attorney's office, declined to discuss the probe but confirmed that the only interview with Mendez occurred at the hospital. She said Mendez was urged to call the investigator if he had further information but that he never did.

Anaheim police and city officials declined to comment beyond their original account, citing the investigation.

The day Mendez and Carrillo went to buy marijuana in Anaheim, Officer Edward Ruiz, an 11-year veteran, and his partner were patrolling near La Palma Avenue and Euclid Street. The officers spotted Carrillo, Mendez and a third man engaged in suspicious activity in the alley, police said.

Mendez said the third man, whom he knew only as Anthony, had sold him a small bag of pot. When they saw the officers drive up, the dealer ducked into a nearby apartment complex, and Carrillo threw the truck into reverse to get away, Mendez said.

The police car barreled toward the front of the truck as Carrillo backed up, Mendez said. He said the officer driving the car had a gun in his right hand as he steered the vehicle with his left. "I could read his lips. He kept saying, 'I got you' over and over," Mendez said.

The truck, still in reverse, jumped a curb and came to a

stop, he said. The patrol car pulled up alongside, and both officers jumped out, yelling at the two men to raise their hands.

Mendez said Carrillo ignored their commands, put the truck in gear and tried to get away. He said the two were afraid that the officers were going to shoot them.

But police, who have not provided details on where Ruiz was standing, said it was he who feared for his safety and thought he was going to be run over. He fired several shots at the truck. His partner, who has not been identified, did not shoot.

When the truck came again to a stop, Mendez said, he turned to Carrillo and saw blood spurting from his chest. Mendez said he knew Carrillo was dying. Then Mendez noticed he was bleeding from a wound to his hip, where, because he is a paraplegic, he had no feeling.

"The officer was never in front of the truck. We never threatened him," Mendez said. "We never gave him a reason to take his gun out."

As the district attorney's investigation continues, Carrillo's autopsy report remains unavailable, and his death certificate says the cause of death is undetermined.

"We were left with a lot of unanswered questions," said Ronald Lara, Carrillo's brother-in-law. "Nobody from the Anaheim



EFFORT: In Santa Ana, Oscar Mendez is helped out of bed by his mother, Josefina, who quit her job to take care of her son.

police has ever explained to us what happened. The district attorney tells us to wait."

Schroeder, the district attorney's spokeswoman, said investigators had not provided answers to the family because the review of the shooting had not been completed.

"Unfortunately, these cases take a long time to investigate. We want to make sure we do a thorough job," she said. "This is a complete, independent review. We don't take anything for granted, not even what the cops say happened."

In an interview at his lawyer's office in Beverly Hills, Mendez admitted to numerous brushes with the law when he was a teenager. Before he was paralyzed at 18, Mendez said, he had been jailed for grand theft auto, carry-

ing a pistol and brandishing a firearm.

Reflecting on his life, Mendez says he wants to continue in a new direction and hopes to take that first step by earning his high school equivalency certificate.

"I mostly want to do it for my mother. After I became paralyzed, I just wanted to give up, but she kept me strong," he said.

Santa Ana attorney Lewis R. Crouse, who represented Carrillo after one of his arrests, said his previous client did not have a violent criminal history. He described Carrillo as a "happy kid trying to be upbeat."

"But Frankie frequently found his way into trouble," Crouse said. "He'd go to the store to get something for his parents, and he'd end up getting in trouble. He was a hard-luck-Charlie

kind of guy."

Alfred Vega said his grandson was not a gang member but had been "in and out of jail for drugs and breaking probation."

John E. Sweeney, who represents Carrillo's grandparents and Mendez, acknowledged the men's criminal past and that they were making a drug buy when they were shot. But he said the police shooting was unjustified.

"It was an illegal shooting. The officers were never threatened," Sweeney said. "And that handgun police said they found smells bad."

It took police 48 hours to give a brief explanation of the shooting, and they never said who owned the gun.

Mendez was never charged in the incident.

Vega, 73, a retired plasterer, did not know Mendez until after the shooting. He shook his head and cried as Mendez described the incident.

Carrillo had lived with the grandparents. So did Carrillo's mother, Debra Valadez, who was Vega's daughter.

Carrillo, an only child, was close to his mother, who had worked at a Target store for 20 years. His birthday was Nov. 11, hers Nov. 12.

Valadez took her son's death hard, her father said. She died of a heart attack April 5, the day after the shooting.

"Their birthdays were a day apart, and they died on the same day in the same grave," said Vega. "At least they're still together."