



HOMEcoming

Former child prodigy now takes on a different role as son

By **RON HARRIS**
The Associated Press

SANTA CRUZ

Adragon De Mello, no longer the boy wonder who graduated college at age 11, is about to face a challenge that life as a child prodigy could not have prepared him for.

De Mello, now a 24-year-old high-tech worker, took custody Thursday of his father — the man who tried to push him toward greatness, and who hoped his son would be a Nobel Prize winner by the age of 16.

Agustin De Mello, dying of bladder cancer, was arrested March 15 after an alleged shootout with police. He has been released to the custody of his son pending trial.

"This is a lot better," Adragon said moments before his dad walked out of jail. "It killed me walking in here and seeing him."

Agustin will be under house arrest at his West Cliff Drive home overlooking Cowell Beach. He will be electronically monitored, with a band around his ankle, pending his May 29 trial.

"He wants to die at home. That's been his concern from day one. He did not want to go to the hospital," said Christine McGuire, Santa Cruz County assistant district attorney.

The father and son became the center of a national debate in the 1980s over parents pushing children toward academic achievement. It led to a long estrangement between the two that only recently has been reconciled.

Adragon received an associate degree

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TOP: Adragon De Mello escorts his father Augustine De Mello on his release from jail on Thursday. The elder De Mello was arrested in March after an alleged shootout with police.

ABOVE: Adragon poses with his father after graduating from UCSC at age 11 in 1988. He is helping his father, who is now under house arrest and dying of bladder cancer.

De Mello

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with highest honors in 1987 from a two-year junior college at age 10. He graduated a year later from UC Santa Cruz, with a degree in computational mathematics, becoming the youngest college graduate in U.S. history.

University officials later reviewed Adragon's record, and said the boy had been allowed to take an "unconscionable" course load.

But Agustin wanted more, and publicly spoke of his hopes that his son would win a Nobel Prize and go on to lead an "intergalactic government."

Adragon never attained all his father's goals. In fact, he spent most of his teen-age years trying to recapture the childhood he never knew.

Now, his life as a young adult again is centered on his dad.

He has spent the past few weeks sitting in a packed Santa Cruz courtroom, watching his shackled father cling to life in a rumpled jail jumpsuit. There were breaks in the proceedings so Agustin could go into a nearby bathroom and bleed.

His body wracked with pain, the 71-year-old Agustin phoned police March 15 saying he was gravely ill.

"My problem is I'm dying of cancer. I'm standing here in a bathtub bleeding to death," he told the 911 dispatcher.

Four hours and several gunshots later, Agustin was taken from his home in handcuffs by a SWAT team. It remains unclear what happened during those four hours, but Agustin now is charged with assault with a deadly weapon.

The odyssey that now has reunited father and son began when Adragon was just 6 weeks old. It was then that his proud father said Adragon uttered his first word: "Hello."

By 3, Adragon had learned how to read and write, his father claimed. And, even if those were exaggerated memories, no one could deny that Adragon was bright beyond his years.

But as Adragon's academic achievements came together, the family fell apart. By the year he graduated from UCSC, Agustin was battling for custody against Adragon's mother, Cathy



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Adragon De Mello arrives at his father's boarded-up house on West Cliff Drive that was the site of a standoff with police in March.

Gunn, who felt the boy was being pushed too hard. A judge gave them joint custody.

Adragon ended up living with his mother in Sunnyvale, enrolling in junior high and trying to catch up with a childhood supplanted by computers and scientific theories.

"In a way, I was excited about doing it because I'd get a chance to be around other kids. It was great," Adragon said during a break at a recent hearing for his father.

At first, Adragon was awful at being a kid. He swung his first baseball bat at age 12, only to see it fly wildly out of his hands. He had little experience with sports or children his own age after being sheltered by his dad for so many years.

"A lot of people feel that I should have some sort of grudge against him for what happened when I was younger," Adragon said. "There were years, mostly in teen-age years, that I was pretty bitter."

Adragon, living under the name James Gunn, graduated from Homestead High School in 1994, six years

after receiving his undergraduate degree. After moving away from his father, he learned to drive and how to play with other children.

Now, during jail visits, Adragon and Agustin have repaired their strained relationship.

"I know he's proud of me. Of course I didn't get a Nobel Prize," Adragon said. "I really didn't have the desire to."

Back in his cluttered oceanfront home, Agustin stood surrounded Thursday by pictures and mementos — as well as dozens of his weightlifting trophies, and photos of Albert Einstein.

With his health fading, Agustin said the only constant in his life is his relationship with Adragon.

"He's the best son in the world. We've always had a great relationship," Agustin said as Adragon stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked down sheepishly.

"I've always been proud of him. I've always wanted him to be happy doing what he wanted to do. Things got side-tracked for many, many reasons but it had nothing to do with his talent."