

# Arrest made in 1993 killing of girl, brother

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WATSONVILLE — A man sheriff's deputies say shot and killed a Pajaro brother and sister two years ago was nabbed when he returned from Mexico to attend his brother's funeral.

A Monterey County Sheriff's Department spokesman said Tuesday that Jorge Hernandez, 21, confessed to killing Jorge and Jessica Cortez in Pajaro on Feb. 10, 1993, as the teen-age boy and his 9-year-old sister walked home from a nearby bakery. The teen-ager had accompanied his sister, who was buying treats for her class Valentine's Day party.

The third-grade student at Ohlone Elementary



Jessica Cortez

School was shot once in the head. Her brother ran into a nearby bakery, where his attacker followed him and gunned him down.

Hernandez, a former Pajaro resident, was arrested Friday night on double murder charges, after funeral services that morning for his brother. He is being held in Monterey County Jail on \$1 million bail. He will be arraigned this week.

Even though sheriff's investigators said they knew the suspect had moved to Mexico, frustrated officers could only wait for him to return, since, they said, that country has no extradition agreements with the United States.

Sheriff's deputies also are searching for a second person believed to have been involved in the shooting.

The children's mother, Maria Mercedes Cortez, who moved to an undisclosed town with her family, said

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late Tuesday she had not heard about the arrest. She received the news with a sigh.

"Do you want me to tell you the truth? It makes me sad. He's going to pay a high price for what he did. But he ruined my life. He destroyed my life, he killed what I loved most in this world," Cortez said. "I want to go see him in jail, and ask him face to face what did my daughter do to him? What did my son do?"

According to sheriff's deputies, Hernandez confessed to shooting both the Cortez children in retaliation for the attack on his younger brother two months earlier. Jose Jesus Hernandez, 15, was shot in the chest while using a pay phone in front of Young's Tire Center in Pajaro.

The boy suffered severe brain damage from his wounds, and lived in a semi-vegetative state for more than two years until he died of pneumonia in a Monterey convalescent hospital March 16.

Jorge Hernandez told sheriff's investigators he believes the boy he shot may have been involved in a gang responsible for shooting his brother, said Monterey County sheriff's Lt. Dave Allard.

"Jorge Cortez may have been part of a group responsible for shooting Jose (Hernandez), but we have not been able to establish Jorge Cortez was one of the shooters," Allard said.

Cortez was linked to Watsonville's City Hall Norteño gang, though police never identified him as an official member. Hernandez and his younger brother are believed to have been involved with the rival Poor Side Watsonville gang.

An arrest in the Cortez killing ends a painful chapter in the life of this small, agricultural town in North Monterey County.

"The nature and the extent of random violence like this is sad, whether the victim is 9 or 90. The bottom line is, certainly Jessica Cortez and to a certain extent Jorge are youthful, innocent victims of senseless violence," Allard said.

The death of the Cortez children, and especially that of a happy little girl eulogized as the "florecita del valle," or the little flower of the valley, mobilized a community whose residents and business owners rarely talked to their neighbors.

Today, after being hit by a flood last year, the community boasts heightened attention from law enforcement, as well as improving public works, recreational and redevelopment projects.

Because of the volatile nature of the case, Allard said the arrest was kept quiet until Tuesday afternoon. Details of the arrest are being withheld, Allard said.

His department wanted to give officers a chance to warn people in the community "who could be potential victims" if there is a backlash to the arrest.

Allard would not be specific, but suggested retaliation is possible against witnesses who saw the Cortez shootings, or members of both families. They also wanted more time to find the second man believed to be involved in the killings.

Anyone with information about a second person involved in the Cortez killings can make an anonymous call to (800)499-CRIME.