

One year later, cops closing in on killers of Cortez children

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

Deputies are so close yet so far away from arresting the men responsible for the shooting deaths of a 16-year-old boy and his 9-year-old sister last February in Pajaro in what investigators believe was a gang-related slaying.

'It's like teetering back and forth. It's kind of like we're so damn close but yet we're so far.'

— Gordon Sonne,
Monterey County
Sheriff's Department

In fact, deputies may have come face-to-face with the man who pulled the trigger that killed Jorge Cortez and his sister, Jessica, on Feb. 10 at El Nopal bakery in Pajaro.

Deputies think a hit was ordered because rival gang members believed Jorge Cortez was involved in a shooting that left a young man in a coma. Cortez, deputies said, was involved in gangs.

Monterey County Sheriff's Office investigator Gordon Sonne said that in May he went to Michoacan, Mexico, to interview a man deputies strongly suspect

■ More stories on page 2

is the shooter in the Cortez slayings. Sonne was met in Michoacan by an FBI agent. The suspect was in jail at the time on burglary and narcotics convictions.

Sonne said information gathered locally led him to the man in Mexico, whose name he would not reveal.

"Of course, he wouldn't admit anything," Sonne said, but a composite drawing of the shooter did talk. "The composite we had, as far as I was concerned, was dead bang."

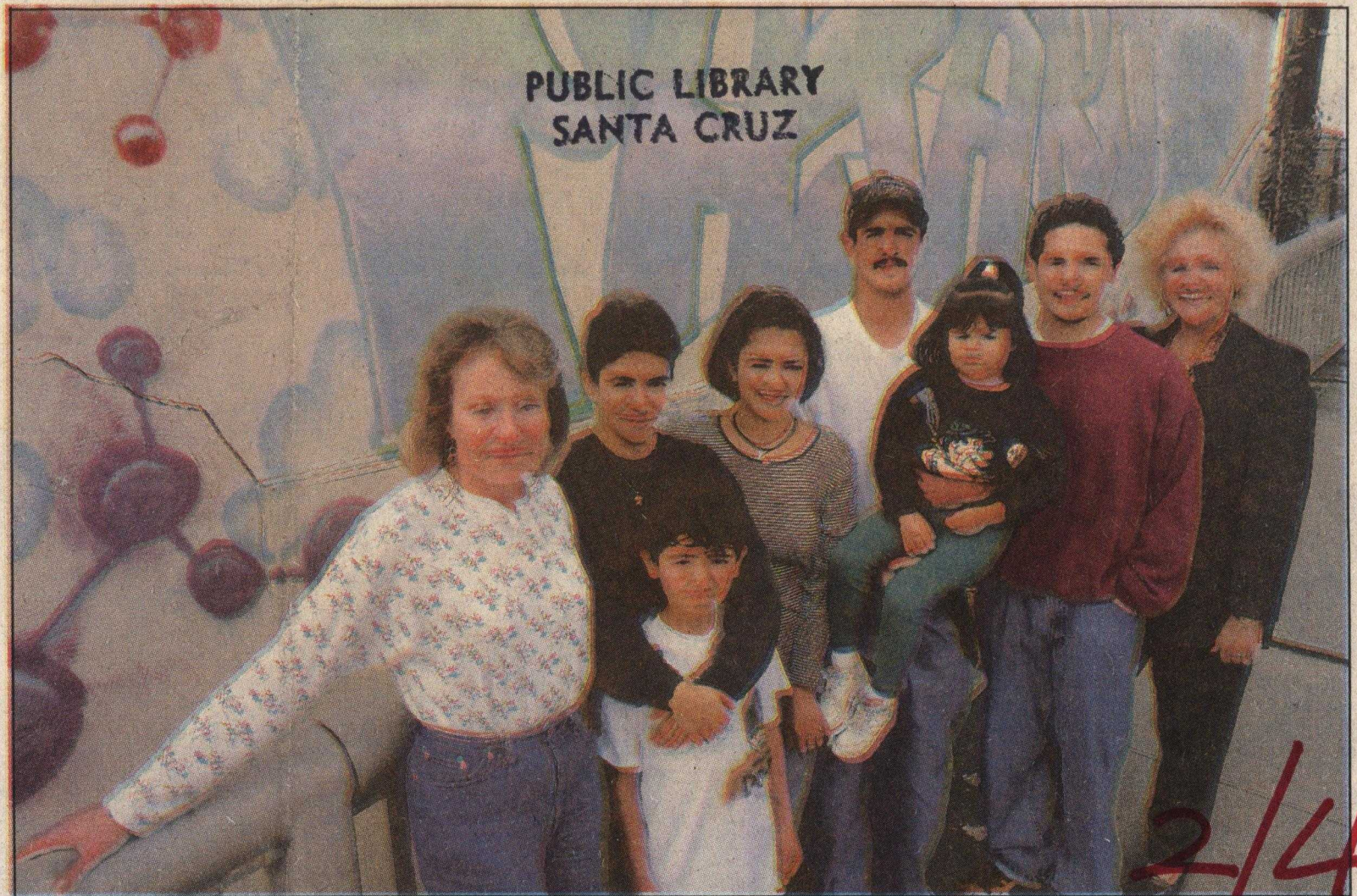
Still, the evidence was not strong enough to start extradition proceedings, Sonne said. But deputies are close to getting one more small piece of evidence that will put them over the top and allow them to go after the man.

How close?
"It's like teetering back and forth," Sonne said. "It's kind of like we're so damn close but yet we're so far."

Standards for making an arrest in the United States are different from those in Mexico, Sonne said. Much stronger evidence usually is needed to make an arrest in the United States than is needed in Mexico. That can work to Sonne's advantage.

Sonne said there is a possibility that the man in Mexico could be arrested, tried and sentenced

See ARREST / page 2 ►



Members of Together in Pajaro in front of the group's spray-painted greeting on Porter Drive near Main Street Bridge, from left, Diane Young;

Rosie Salcedo and son David, 9; Elvira Martinez; her brother Marco Martinez, holding niece Talissa Quintana, 4; Martin Reyes; and Karen Miller.

Watchword in Pajaro: Recovery

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

After years of getting little attention, the community of Pajaro last year got the kind of attention it wasn't looking for: the shock of the slaying of a 9-year-old girl and her 16-year-old brother on their way to the bakery.

A year after the Feb. 10, 1994, shootings of Jessica and Jorge Cortez, there is still some fear in the community — some par-

ents wait for their children at the school bus stop, and small children at Church of the Assumption say they're afraid.

But recovery, not fear, is the watchword in Pajaro these days.

It's not just recovery from the shock of the shootings, but from a lot of other problems in the community of mostly older homes, low-income apartments and family-owned businesses across the Pajaro River from Watsonville in Monterey County.

About 3,000 people live in Pajaro.

In the last year, these are some of the services that have come to Pajaro: additional sheriff's patrol, a couple of community cleanups, an open gym at Pajaro Middle School, formation of Boy Scout and Cub Scout troops, construction of a mini-park, and lighting at Salinas and Elkhorn roads.

The bridge over the Pajaro River is being repaired and wid-

ened, and Redevelopment Agency funds have been used for painting over graffiti, rehabilitating housing and fixing earthquake damage at the Porter-Vallejo Mansion, on Bishop Street, now used as a senior center.

A group called Together in Pajaro, or TIP, has helped push for or organize many of the improvements.

"We just asked for help and

See PAJARO / page 4 ►

ARREST

► From Page 1

in Mexico for the Cortez murders. He said deputies here are working on that possibility.

At least two other men were involved in the murders, Sonne said. One is believed to have driven the get-away car, and the other accompanied the shooter. Sonne said deputies have been able to piece together a pretty clear picture of the killings.

Only a few small pieces that would complete the picture are missing before deputies could

make arrests. Deputies, however, need witnesses to speak out. The story is the same: People are reluctant to come forward.

"People are afraid to talk," Sonne said.

Whether Jorge Cortez lived and died by the sword can be debated endlessly. What people do agree on is that his sister, a student at Ohlone Elementary School, didn't deserve to die, Sonne said.

The death of Jessica Cortez outraged and shocked the entire community.

"She had a bright future," Sonne said. "And I'll tell you, anybody that says (her death) doesn't bring

a lump to their throat, they are not telling you the truth."

Even hard-core gang bangers are touched by her death, he said.

"They may present one image when there are on the streets in front of their buddies," Sonne said.

"But when the lights go off and it's late at night, they lay in bed, thinking. This bothers them, too."

Anyone with information about the murders is asked to call Sonne at 755-3772 or call the sheriff's office Tip Line at 422-2933.

PAJARO

► From Page 1

everybody came forward," said Diane Young, an organizer of TIP who was named 1994 Woman of the Year by the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce last week for her efforts.

Young and her husband, Pete, own Young's Tire Service on Porter Drive.

"It's the first time all these things have happened together," said the Rev. Raul Carvajal, who has served at Church of the Assumption in Pajaro for eight years.

There's substantially less graffiti in town than there was a year ago, Carvajal said.

"Our little town is looking cleaner," he said.

The Cortez shootings sparked community interest, but Young and others interviewed for this article are quick to point out that TIP was organized in late 1993 — before the Cortez case or either of the two shootings that preceded it.

TIP was getting started about the time Monterey County Supervisor Tom Perkins became Pajaro's representative through redistricting.

Perkins said he has devoted "considerable time" to Pajaro, but he's not complaining.

At the Chamber of Commerce dinner last week, Perkins said Young has "made sure we politicians get our act together and assisted her in bringing more services to Pajaro."

In 1994, Perkins said, the county did a couple of "sweeps" through Pajaro, aimed at everything from drug dealing and gang activity to substandard housing.

The sweep team included sheriff's deputies, health and safety inspectors, prosecuting attorneys, and county social service agencies.

On one of the sweeps, Perkins said, "we identified 70 to 90 peo-

ple living under the (Pajaro River) bridge."

The social-service agencies came along to help find housing for those who had been under the bridge.

There were cases where "living conditions were deplorable," Perkins said, and inspectors have followed up on violations. On San Juan Road, a rooming house above a long-closed bar has been condemned.

When there's new construction in Pajaro, Perkins said, he wants to "make sure the housing is appropriate." There are a lot of absentee landlords, he said.

A key element of TIP, Young said, is combining the efforts of different community groups.

"We're working with the merchants, the residents, the church and schools," said Young, who likes to joke that "Pajaro is going to annex Watsonville."

Perkins said he'd like to see more industry in Pajaro, but is reluctant to say what type of industry for fear of driving up the price of land.

Monterey County's Redevelopment Agency has a Castroville-Pajaro project area. Last March, an advisory committee was formed for the project area, with subcommittees for Castroville and Pajaro.

Karen Miller, a member of the advisory committee, said the group is working on some long-range plans for Pajaro.

Miller said the community doesn't need more rental housing, and "drainage has to be improved" — a problem that was evident with the recent rains.

A \$400,000 "Healthy Start" grant for Pajaro is being sought through the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, said Ricardo Balderos, principal at Ohlone School on Bay Farms Road.

The grant, which would be for three years, would cover health and recreation programs for the community, not just the schools.