

“UNSOLVED WITH STEVE GREGORY” EPISODE 106

TRANSCRIPT

SEGMENT 1

Announcer

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere on the iHeartRadio app.

Steve Gregory

On any given day in Southern California, hundreds of investigators are working more than 10,000 unsolved cases. That's 1000s of friends and families who have lost loved ones, 1000s of people who got away with a crime, and 1000s of murderers who still walked the streets. Killers who may be your neighbor, go to your church, or could be dating a close friend. For the next two hours, we'll highlight cases that have gotten cold baffled investigators or just need that one witness to speak out. This is Unsolved with Steve Gregory.

Los Angeles County Sheriff's case number 011119820493-011 the murders of Cesar Rodriguez and Larry Villegas.

Captain Joe Mendoza runs the LA County Sheriff's Homicide Bureau which is based in Monterey Park. Mendoza has been a huge help and was instrumental in getting us cases to kick off this program. One day I was speaking with Captain Mendoza about a story for KFI News when he mentioned the case of Cesar Rodriguez. Mendoza says it's very rare a Sheriff's explorer gets killed especially in such a random way. Mendoza puts me in touch with Detective Louis Aguillera. We set up a meeting time at Homicide Bureau where we talk about the case of the Murdered Explorer.

Detective Aguillera

So back in August 28 of 2011 at about 3:10 in the morning, which was a Sunday, Sheriff's Deputies from the Norwalk Sheriff's Station received the phone call of a 911 call of shots fired in the area and potential gunshot victims at the area of the 11800 block of Painter Avenue and that's in the city of Whittier. It's a county of Whittier, which is unincorporated LA County. When deputies responded, they saw the two victims laying on the curb driveway area of the residence. They saw one of the victims was receiving CPR from a civilian. And there was a bunch of screaming there were people running around hectic scene basically. And they noticed shell casings all over the street as well.

Steve Gregory

So when you roll up to a scene like that, and it's chaos, you've got two victims lying on the street like that. Where does the detective start? What do you do? How do you how do you assess?

Detective Aguillera

Well, as an investigator, we hope that the patrol deputies that handle the initial scene and the assessment, separate witnesses, figure out who your victims were that survived, you obviously have two dead victims at the scene. So you're hoping that they're able to canvass the neighborhood and collect as many witnesses as possible. Get a story, get a theory of what happened, put that out to not only assist in units from the Sheriff's Department, but outside agencies as well. So you can then for start looking for your suspect vehicle, if in fact that vehicle was involved.

Steve Gregory

Now we're talking 2011. When did you take the case?

Detective Aguillera

Myself and my partner were given the case about a year ago.

Steve Gregory

And so is this considered a cold case?

Detective Aguillera

It is a cold case, it was being investigated by two detectives that have since retired.

Steve Gregory

Okay, so that's typically how that works. Yes. Okay. So what can you tell us about what the first two detectives did with the case?

Detective Aguillera

The first two investigators looked at the fact that the area where the shooting occurred is a gang neighborhood in Whittier. And they were looking at it as a gang type drive by, a gang murder. They were looking at one of the local rival gangs, which is just a few miles away. And a lot of their investigation was focused on one particular gang, which is like I said, nearby.

Steve Gregory

Define a gang neighborhood. What does that mean?

Detective Aguilera

Gang neighborhood in this particular area of southside Whittier is where I actually happen to work in the late 80s and early 90s. It's an area that is known as "the acres" and it's called "the acres" because the property lots are large. There are several homes three to four on each lot. So it's known as "the acres". Southside Whittier at that time was a very active gang. They have several rivalries in the area.

Steve Gregory

So Southside Whittier was the name of the gang of the victim gang?

Detective Aguilera

Correct. Our victims and the people that were with our victims were not gang related at all. No gang member was in that driveway at the time of the shooting.

Steve Gregory

How do you know that? I'm just curious like when you say no one was a member of the gang, how do you know that?

Detective Aguilera

There's no documentation for all the people that they detained, which were all victims and witnesses. The gang investigators didn't know any of those persons that were detained as well. And those people all had clear records and had never been arrested before. So there were no gang affiliations, no gang tattoos, gang attire, nothing. So we've ruled out the fact that they, being the two victims and their friends were gang members at that time.

Steve Gregory

We're talking with Detective Louis Aguilera with the LA County Sheriff's Department's Homicide Bureau. It's a cold case involving the death of 19 year old Cesar Rodriguez and 24 year old Larry Villegas. How soon after the the shooting happened... And I was reading the reports that you provide it to me, but it looks as though that you had a description of a vehicle, a getaway vehicle and a possible description, vague description of the people inside so tell us about that.

Detective Aguilera

Right - when deputies responded and once they contacted witnesses at the scene they were told gray Scion. A dark gray Scion, on four door box type vehicle newer model was last seen in a certain direction out of the area after the shooting. Deputies put that out on the radio. They broadcasted it to assistant

units from the Sheriff's Department. And that in turn got relayed to the Whittier police department which is a neighboring police agency. What are your police department detained a vehicle shortly after within minutes, matching the description of our suspect vehicle. Inside that car were four people. All four people were detained, Whittier PD notified Norwalk Sheriff's Deputies. And then Norwalk Sheriff's deputies took the witnesses that they had at the scene, transported to where the detainment was and they did field identification show ups.

Steve Gregory

How does that work? How does the field identification show up work?

Detective Aguillera

So field show up is what we do when we detain somebody immediately after the incident. Patrol deputies will take an individual out of the vehicle, walk them away from the vehicle, the witness will be in a separate patrol vehicle, never get out. So the person being detained doesn't see who our witnesses are witnesses will take a look from a distance probably anywhere between 20 to 35,40 feet, We'll have the suspect or the potential suspect look in their direction. We'll have them turn sideways, both sides. And the patrol deputy that's speaking with the witness will ask them is that the person that you saw in the vehicle? Is that the person that you saw do the shooting? Or is that the person that you think is the suspect? And they'll get a yay or nay? And then you go on to the next person and the next witness as well?

Steve Gregory

What did the investigators get that night?

Detective Aguillera

That night the witnesses identified the car as possibly being the suspect vehicle, but they couldn't identify anybody in the vehicle. So as the suspects at the time of the shooting, so those people in the vehicle in the sign were detained. They were interviewed by investigators, and investigators eventually let them free. Let them go home because they felt they were not the suspects. There were no firearms found in the car. And there were no gang ties as well to the people that were detained in the Scion.

Steve Gregory

And what was the timeframe between the shooting and the time you they found the Scion?

Detective Aguillera

Within a half hour.

Steve Gregory

How much distance?

Detective Aguillera

I believe it was about three to four miles away, very close.

Steve Gregory

Is that common? When there's a drive by shooting like that? Do you usually find the suspect vehicle that quickly that close?

Detective Aguillera

It's not common within about 30 minutes, but it is common to happen within a couple of minutes. Because you're catching the cars. It's leaving the scene. And that's just luck. It's happenstance. If a patrol vehicle happens to be in the area, sometimes the patrol deputies or officers hear shots fired. They go in that direction. Obviously that's that's what we do. Right? When we hear shots fired, we go to that location. And the theory is the fastest car leaving is probably the car you want to pull over because that's gonna be your suspect or a possible victim, as well.

Steve Gregory

We're talking with detective Louis Aguillera with the LA County Sheriff's Department's Homicide Bureau. And when we come back we're going to talk about 19 year old Cesar Rodriguez's connection to the Sheriff's department and it's a very tragic situation as Unsolved continues. This is KFI AM 640. Now time for a news update.

SEGMENT 2

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory and this is Unsolved. Before a break, we were getting a rundown of a case involving an 18 year old Cesar Rodriguez and 24 year old Larry Villegas. Both were shot and killed in front of a residence in Whittier in 2011. Following a party, Detective Louis Aguillera was telling us a little bit about the connection between the shooting and gang activity, especially in the South Whittier area. So, Detective before the break, I was telling people that I wanted to talk about the connection of 19 year old Cesar Rodriguez to the Sheriff's Department. Tell us about that.

Detective Aguillera

Yeah, Cesar at the time he was killed was a Explorer at Norwalk Sheriff's Station, which is a volunteer. The age ranges I believe, is between 15 and 24 years of age. And explorers are usually kids that want to become deputy sheriffs or want to become police officers. Once they become of age. Cesar had been there for quite a while at the station. He was well liked. Our explorers were uniforms basically mimicking what sheriff's deputies wear. And they have various assignments that they do throughout the station as well as the cities that Norwalk station patrols.

Steve Gregory

So how soon after did Norwalk station get notified that one of their explorers had been gunned down?

Detective Aguillera

While deputies were there at the scene, they're conducting their investigation doing their assessment of how many victims they had, how many witnesses they had, it took them a little while to figure out hey, that's that's Cesar. That's the kid we see every week in the station. Because things were so frantic. Cesar's brother, who was there at the time was giving Caesar CPR, trying to save his life. He didn't have time to say, Hey, this is an explorer, it took them a little bit to figure out that that's one of ours.

Steve Gregory

And you say one of our, so what does that do to the department and when you find someone so young, 19 years old, who's an explorer, whom I understand had already applied to become a deputy because he'd been in what four years?

Detective Aguillera

Yes, as an explorer, correct. .

Steve Gregory

So what does that do to the psyche into to the sort of the whole morale and mood?

Detective Aguillera

Yeah, it definitely changes things. We obviously we don't prioritize victims over the other one over the other. But when it hits your own, it's a sense of reality, in a sense, because we do we being homicide

investigators, handle officer involved shootings when officers or deputies are killed. So we've handled scenes like this before. But it's rare for a patrol deputy to handle something like that when it's one of their own. So it hits you it takes some time to sink in that this is someone that changed with us every week, came to the same locker room that we do, use the same workout facilities, walked the same hallways, and today, you know, in 2021, should be a sheriff's deputy and would be a sheriff's deputy if he hadn't been killed back in 2011. So it's it's heartbreaking that one of our own has been killed. And it's important to me because I at 18 years old, was a civilian employee as well for the Sheriff's Department. So I know what it's like, as a civilian employee to look up to every deputy shirt that walks by, and that's what I did. I idolize these sheriff's deputies while I was a community service officer. And the day I turned 21 was the day I was sworn in. And it's a sense of pride. And unfortunately, you know, Cesar didn't get to realize his goal.

Steve Gregory

And it's important to note that Larry Villegas, 24 years old. He was friends with Caesar, right.

Detective Aguillera

Larry and Cesar grew up together. Correct.

Steve Gregory

And Larry left behind not only a wife, but a infant son and a pregnant wife. And she gave birth after he died and had a daughter. So he was a mechanic.

Detective Aguillera

Yes.

Steve Gregory

So they these are two young men who had promising lives, they had their their futures ahead of them. Do you suppose, detective, and putting you on the speculation trail. If you believe it was a gang shooting of some kind or gang related, do you think they were aware that Cesar was an explorer and was sort of a quote unquote deputy?

Detective Aguillera

Yeah, I'm tend to be leaning in a different direction than the gang crime. Myself and my partner have looked at the boxes of material. And the thing that we did notice and I come from a gang background, I

worked gangs for 14 years because before I became a homicide investigator, so I'm familiar with how gangs work and how retaliation shooting work. And there were no retaliation shootings after that murder, which to me says a lot. Because if they targeted Cesar, Larry, and the people that were with them, in Southside Whittier's neighborhood, they meaning the rival gang assumed that these guys were gang members, which they weren't. So the real gang members would take that as disrespect that they thought those guys were one of us. Let's go back and get them. But there were none. And then in researching cases back in 2011, prior to the double murder, there were no shootings between the two gangs, there were none. So there wasn't gang activity going on. Which leads us to believe that something happened before Larry Cesar and their friends arrived at that spot.

Steve Gregory

That meaning the house?

Detective Aguillera

The location where the murders occurred, something went down hours before. And that's what we're starting to gather from the witnesses that we're talking to.

Steve Gregory

We're talking with detective Louis Aguillera. With the LA County Sheriff's department's Homicide Bureau, about a cold case from 2011 involving the shooting death of 19 year old Cesar Rodriguez and 24 year old Larry Villegas. So are you telling me the initial detectors went down in the gang path? With these two guys, and you're telling me that that may not be the case?

Detective Aguillera

Yes, that's exactlyv right.

Steve Gregory

Okay. So we got to figure out those details. When we come back. We'll talk about that. Don't forget #250 on your cell phone. You can leave a tip or story idea, and also our website at KFIAM640.com keyword "unsolved". We'll come back with detective Louis Aguillera but first, it's a KFI news update.

SEGMENT 3

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. This is Unsolved. I'm Steve Gregory. If you have a story idea or a tip on a case, just dial #250 on your cell phone and say the key word "unsolved".

Also download our podcast, it's on the iHeartRadio app, Apple, or wherever you get your podcasts. When you took over the case, you look at all the materials and they come in these big boxes, right? You just got boxes of file,

Detective Aguillera

Correct.

Steve Gregory

You're reading through all these files. You're talking with people. And you seem to believe that there could be a different theory that was initially investigated. Correct?

Detective Aguillera

Correct. I want to look at what the investigators did, obviously read some of the material that the witnesses on their statements and what they said. And nothing led me to believe that there was a gang war going on prior to and after our double murder, which is very uncommon. With a gang shooting, there's always retaliation. There's something there's graffiti, there's something going on, to show that there's a gang war going on. At the time speaking to the gang investigators that were there back in 2011. They were saying there was no gang activity being posted up on the walls, no graffiti indicating that the Next Door gang and Southside Whittier, were at war time. Speaking with witnesses who have since come forward, because as time goes by people come out of the woodwork and now they're more comfortable to speak with you. They're saying that there were a group of people at that same spot, a group of men. Some of those men were actually Southside Whittier gang members. They had an argument with someone or some people. The argument went away, parties left, the group of males that included the gang members left. Cesar gets off work about two in the morning, he was a security guard at Target. Cesar calls Larry and his brother and says, "Hey, let's meet, I want to see you guys, I want to hang out, I'm just getting off of work". Unbeknownst to these gentlemen, the spot they're going to go meet at to hang out is where that friction, that argument occurred. And they didn't know they had no clue. They were there. When they met at the spot where the murders occurred. They were there for 10 minutes, when the car pulled up and shot and killed both of them.

Steve Gregory

How far after the original gathering, and they're gathering?

Detective Aguillera

About three to four hours.

Steve Gregory

Three to four hours. So what was so significant about that location?

Detective Aguillera

One of the Friends of Cesar lived in that lot. There were four homes or three homes on the property. And one of Cesars friends happened to live there. So that was a spot that was known to them. Why the earlier party was at that location? I don't know, I can only surmise that there was a party going on across the street. More of a kickback than a wild, DJ backyard party. And I think they may have wanted to be near a party where there were probably girls going in and out of the house. They being the first group because at the time of the murder of that party was was over with. It was already three in the morning.

Steve Gregory

Do the same occupants live there still today?

Detective Aguillera

Some.

Steve Gregory

Some?

Detective Aguillera

Correct.

Steve Gregory

Have they been able to offer you any insight?

Detective Aguillera

Nothing outside of what I'm telling you, that there was a first group that was there. And that's pretty much the extent of it. They've kind of stayed away from the argument, but we're hearing from other people that have come forward.

Steve Gregory

Talking with detective Louis Aguillera with the LA County Sheriff's Department's Homicide Bureau. So could it be as simple as wrong place wrong time?

Detective Aguillera

I believe that's exactly what it is.

Steve Gregory

So how do you find closure on a case like this when there is no, you know, it almost seems like it would have been easier if these guys had been getting members. Right?

Detective Aguillera

Right. It wouldn't make sense if they were gang members right? We could we could put a wrap our brains around why this murder occurred. But to us working in the homicide field and being here so long you realize your life can be taken from me in a heartbeat. You know, I've seen where a young girl in Compton took a stray bullet while watching TV on the couch because of a gang shooting down the street. So your life can be taken at any point we obviously we don't take anything for granted here. Closure is a word I never used and I talked to people about this because you you can't put closure on or for the Villegas and Rodriguez family. I speak to them constantly to this day, 10 years later, we text, we have text exchange. And I'll get text messages from victims families that I had 10 years ago telling me today would have been their birthday. It's Christmas, I miss him, I miss her. So there's never any closure, because that loved one, that victim is always going to be missed by the family, birthdays, holidays, any kind of event that comes up. There's going to be that hole there, that person won't be there can't celebrate with them. So there's never any closure. I hate to use that word. That's why we're just there to provide answers. And I'm hoping with this case, we will be able to provide answers.

Steve Gregory

So that your alternate to closure.

Detective Aguillera

Exactly.

And if those answers lead to closure? Bonus.

Correct, right.

Steve Gregory

What was it like meeting the family for the first time of both of the victims? Tell me, tell me about when you pick that up that case at file, and you make that call and say, Hey, I'm Detective Aguillera. I'm the new detective on the case. What was that first meeting like?

Detective Aguillera

There were a lot of tears between the families, I met them separately. There was a sense of relief, because a new set of eyes was looking at the case. And it's no disrespect to the other detectives who did a great job I felt. But I think every case it goes cold. It's always good to put a new set of eyes on it. Just like we have people proofread our reports, right, we only see what we want and what we write. If we give it to somebody else to proofread our reports, they're going to make some corrections. So I think all cases need a second or third look. So I think they they felt a sense of relief. They were very thankful. We explained our intentions to them. And the Villegas family really took it to heart the things that we said and they were devastated. We actually had all of them in the room with us. So it was it was a sense of comfort for them that we were reopening the case. And taking another look and we were going to start from square one. Cesars family, Cesars mother and her brother had been fantastic throughout. She constantly will text me and give me updates. I tell the families, you guys are going to learn a lot more. And that's what happens with homicide cases. You'll hear more about the murder than we will you'll hear it before we do because they're gonna want to go to you and tell you hey, this is what we heard. They're not going to want to call Sheriff's homicide, unfortunately and say hey, I want to give you a tip because they just don't trust it. They right they don't want to be exploited. They don't want to be exposed as an informant or as a witness. So they'll go to the families and that's what I used to always tell family members when I'd have a when I worked gangs, hey, people are going to come to provide information can you please forward it to us and that's what Cesar's mother has been doing for me and Cesars brother, as well. Helping us and given us some some tips. And that's all I ask people just point us in the right direction and we'll run with it. You know, we'll keep your your information and anonymous point is in the right direction and let us do our job.

Steve Gregory

More with Detective Louis Aguillera. But first, this is KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 4

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory and this is Unsolved. To learn more about this case or others, go to our website at KFIAM640.com, key word "unsolved". Don't

forget to email us your tips and or story ideas : unsolved@iheartmedia.com... That's, unsolved@iheartmedia.com

We're back talking with Detective Louis Aguillera with the LA County Sheriff's Department's Homicide Bureau. He took on a cold case from 2011. Dealing with the deaths of 19 year old Cesar Rodriguez and 24 year old Larry Villegas. And Rodriguez was a sheriff's explorer, he had just applied to become a sheriff's deputy with the LA County Sheriff's Department. And Villegas was a mechanic, a local mechanic who left behind a son and a daughter and a wife. So, Detective, as we wrap this case up from your point of view, tell us something you've not said publicly about the case it give us something new that we haven't heard before.

Detective Aguillera

Yeah, in combing over all of the reports and the boxes of discovery and evidence that the original investigators had, one name in particular kept popping up on various reports - patrol reports as well as investigative reports. And the name kept popping up through confidential informants and confidential informants, were basically putting this person not as the shooter, but as a person of interest, a person that investigators might be or might want to talk to. He has local ties. He's from the area but not from that gang. And it makes sense to me, being the gang detective, former gang detective, once again, as I said earlier, than a lot of people haven't come forward, and that there were no retaliation shootings. Because the person that did the shooting lives in that neighborhood. So people were concerned, that this shooter is from that neighborhood, they were concerned to come forward. But as I said, as time goes by, people are starting to come forward. And since we took the case over a year ago, that same name keeps coming to us really same name. So obviously, we're not going to say who this person is. But it's someone that we're really taking a hard look at. If you has a potential suspect.

Steve Gregory

Have you had contact with this person?

Detective Aguillera

We have not.

Steve Gregory

What's the next step? What's the approach?

Detective Aguillera

The next step is to try and get some evidence to put this person there in the area at the time. And try and find some people that are close to this person to see if they're willing to talk. And we'll have to do backgrounds on the people that are close with this person to see what their criminal history is, to see what they were doing at the time as well. Because remember, where we have three people that were in that sign, at the time of the birth, at least three, at least three. And we need to find out who those other two people were as well.

Steve Gregory

I remember in the report that there might have been a witness that said the back seat was folded down. So that's most likely where the shooting happened, right?

Detective Aguillera

From the backseat seat, right behind the driver behind the truck. Right. And the quickest way or the best way to get to your shooter, your suspect is you find the weak link in that car. And that's what we're hoping to go.

Steve Gregory

11 years later?

Detective Aguillera

11 years later.

Steve Gregory

What are the odds of that?

Detective Aguillera

It happens a lot you that this television show that "First 48" drives me crazy, because people think 48 hours, 48 hours, you have to solve a case. And we know here in our office, that it takes months to years to solve. And it's usually somebody that comes to jail that doesn't want to be in jail that wants to talk about that murder that happened six months ago.

Steve Gregory

What about the \$25,000 reward? Is that still active?

Detective Aguillera

The rewards are still active for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the suspects involved in this double murder.

Steve Gregory

And it's important to note that 25,000 was put up by the county board of supervisors, Correct?

Detective Aguillera

Correct. Yeah, spearheaded by Janice Hahn.

Steve Gregory

Sure. So, as a detective when you find out that this singular name keeps popping up through confidential informants, are these somebody that have been been with you or attached to you guys for a long time? Are these new CI's is this reliable information? And I don't mean to seem naive about this, but is this 11 years later? Is this information you think solid?

Detective Aguillera

Right, the information that came initially there In the first investigation were from a lot of confidential informants that were getting arrested. Okay, we're in trouble. My information and my partner's information that we're now getting are from people that are just coming forward off the street. They're seen flyers. They're seeing all the advertising that we're doing. They're looking at the billboards on Imperial highway and Carmenita and Leffingwell. And they're saying, Wow, 11 years later, this case hasn't been solved. Maybe I can make a call to help. And that's exactly what's happening. And we're getting the same information.

Steve Gregory

Is there going to be another push with flyers and visuals, anything like that? Is there a plan for that?

Detective Aguillera

There will be there were there's been several marches in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, COVID killed us on that. So we're hoping to do that again. Just to get the word out there. If we have to knock on every door and Southside Whittier neighborhood, we will. We want people in the neighborhood to see us, to

talk to us not necessarily see a billboard, read a flyer, see a newspaper story. We want them to meet us the detectives, the police officers, the deputy sheriff's that are in the neighborhood trying to get answers for these victims.

Steve Gregory

Are you confident now that I'm not gonna use word closure? But are you confident you'll get your answers?

Detective Aguillera

I'm confident that we're going to make a move on this case. I'm hopeful that we're able to corroborate what's been told to us with some firm solid evidence.

Steve Gregory

Whether or not, you don't think this is the shooter you think it might be somebody attached to it right or with knowledge of it, though?

Detective Aguillera

I think the person of interest for us is our shooter.

Steve Gregory

Okay. Anything else?

Detective Aguillera

No, I just wanted to thank you. I appreciate what you're doing. And hopefully we can get some answers as to what happened and why it happened.

Steve Gregory

Thank you, detective Louis Aguillera with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Homicide Bureau coming up. We talked with the Captain in charge of the Norwalk station. That's where Cesar Rodriguez was an explorer. And that's where Rodriguez's picture continues to hang an inspiration for all explorers present and future. But first, this is KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 5

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory and this is Unsolved. Before the news break, I was talking with Detective Louis Aguillera about the murders of Cesar Rodriguez and Larry Villegas, Aguillera suggested I speak with the department's Captain Jim Tatreau about Rodriguez's time as an explorer at the Norwalk station. Joining me now is Captain Jim Tatreau. He is the ranking official at the Los Angeles County Sheriff's department's Norwalk station. Now at the time, Tatreau was a lieutenant he was in charge of the detective bureau at Norwalk station. First of all, Captain, thank you very much for joining us tonight. We appreciate your time. I want to I want to go back to that night that you that you were notified about it because it sounds like everyone knew Rodriguez. Everyone knew who he was, he'd been a real popular cadet. So tell us a little bit about how you found out about the death of Rodriguez.

Captain Tatreau

Sure, well, thank you for having me and shedding some light and keeping this case alive for us. We all knew Cesar at Norwalk station, he was an explorer and had been for a few years. He was one of the older explorers, and he was a leader. And he was just a likable guy, very personable. And we were invested in him. And he seemed interested with the Sheriff's department, as well

Steve Gregory

Talk about what an explorer is and what they do.

Captain Tatreau

Yeah, an explorer is is a young man or woman, high school age that, you know, joins the program with us. And we spend time with them, mentoring them, you know, kind of kind of teaching them what to do in certain situations. They practice physical fitness, they take written tests, but they get to go on fun field trips together and Team Build and bond with like minded individuals.

Steve Gregory

What's the purpose? What purposes?

Captain Tatreau

Yeah, the purpose is just to raise up some some good, strong, competent leaders. And you know, to raise these kids, right, it takes a village, it really does. So you've got the parents, you've got the teachers,

you've got coaches with youth sports, and you've got the police and Sheriff's Department who have these programs.

Steve Gregory

Are these individuals? Are these young kids that that desire to be in law enforcement? Or are these kids joining because their parents are having issues or problems with them? Do they come from specific low income neighborhoods, what's kind of the makeup and demographic?

Captain Tatreau

Yeah, the makeup of the explorer program is usually made up of the community that surrounds because each station has their local explorer program. Ours consisting of Norwalk, La Mirada, East and South Whittier, unincorporated areas. And these kids are, are special because they want to be there. They're there on their own volition, they're interested in the program, they want to do something better, they may aspire to become a law enforcement officer down the road or join the military, or maybe just not maybe just, you know, get some some good leadership skills that could serve them well in their business opportunities down the road. But unlike other programs we have where we have troubled at risk youth. This is not one of those, this is one of the ones they come and join voluntarily.

Steve Gregory

And I know it's kind of, I know, you impart upon this group, sort of the paramilitary sort of style and technique that might be in the real Academy and the deputies academy. In I would imagine that that instills a lot of discipline, and instills a lot of values. And a lot of common sense into these young people. Would you characterize that with the case of Cesar?

Captain Tatreau

Yes. Like all the other explorers Cesar had to go through an explorer Academy, which is similar to the police academy where they go through a bunch of training and and and have some tests and physical training. And then they have a graduation at the end of that if they are successfully able to complete that program. Cesar did that. And as you know, he thrived in that program with us for years. And and those guys would do many activities on an off duty together. They became lifelong friends, many of them.

Steve Gregory

We're talking with Captain Jim Tatreau with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Norwalk station, about Cesar's. Kind of his role in the Explorer program and sort of how he made an impact on

the station. Can you tell us some personal stories or anecdotal stories about anything he's done or he had done at the station or something that he was known for?

Captain Tatreau

You know, he was he was known at the station as a leader. He was one of the older guys. He was getting ready to transition out of that program due to his age, but because of his age, and because of his experience in the program, the younger ones looked to Caesar for guidance and kind of aspired to be like the older guys, including Cesar. Cesar, not only did that program, but he had a full time job locally at a big box store. And and he just said a good example.

Steve Gregory

Would you say he sort of exemplified the type of individual you wanted in that program?

Captain Tatreau

Absolutely. Absolutely. Cesar was a great kid. He aspired to do more with his life had a goal to become a deputy sheriff. That was his personal goal. And we were excited to have him back at Norwalk station someday. And and that was the goal.

Steve Gregory

So let's go back to that night, Captain. How did you find out about it? And what was the initial reaction?

Captain Tatreau

Oh, I found out early early the next morning about that. And it was just gut wrenching to hear because he was such a good kid. We know that he wasn't involved in any gang activity. We know he was a good boy. This particular night, he had just got off work at the local big box store. And at midnight, and he, he saw some buddies hanging out in his neighborhood down the street. They were just friends. And so he stopped by to talk with them. And you know, as my dad would tell me, as a young man, nothing good happens after 10pm And that's why, you know, you should be inside sometimes when you're young. And in this case, Cesar was just caught outside in a in a neighborhood where someone thought he was a gang member.

Steve Gregory

How many years you've been in Norwalk station?

Captain Tatreau

Oh, gosh. I've been in Norwalk station throughout my entire career from deputy through Sergeant Lieutenant now captain, this this stint. I've been at Norwalk station for about 11 years.

Steve Gregory

So looking back and you said you were a lieutenant at the time in charge of the detective bureau there. What was your first gut reaction? Looking at it through the lens of a detective? What did you believe had happened?

Captain Tatreau

Well, after I got the preliminary facts, it sounded to me like they might have been mistaken. That group that whole group was taken for someone else or someone's else. It was, it quickly became a priority of mine. Even though that case wasn't assigned to us at Norwalk station, it was assigned to our homicide bureau. But I wanted to make sure we kept that case alive and I've done my best to keep it alive. Throughout the years. I've become close friends with Cesar's mom Lupe and they're just a good family. I've met Larry Villegas' mom, the other victim in this case. They're a good group. And it's unfortunate because both these young men were good young men.

Steve Gregory

Were talking with Captain Jim Tatreau with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Norwalk station. When we come back, we'll continue our discussion about the tragic death of Cesar Rodriguez and Larry Villegas. But first this is KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 6

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. Download and subscribe to the Unsolved with Steve Gregory podcast on the iHeartRadio app, Apple podcasts, Spotify, or anywhere you get your podcasts.

Welcome back to Unsolved. I'm Steve Gregory and we have been talking with Captain Jim Tatreau with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. He's the ranking official at Norwalk station, that is the station where Cesar Rodriguez was an explorer. That's also the station that according to the Captain here, he could have actually been been a deputy he just applied to be a deputy was about to go to the academy. Captain, before the break, we were talking a lot about what explorers do, what the program is about in the contributions they make. Want to talk a little bit about the fact that you know, Rodriguez was a good kid, you described him as being a leader, one of the older young men in the program, talk about Norwalk station, talk about that the neighborhood around there, what kind of people live there?

What kind of a place is it? Is it older? Retired individuals? Is it you know, what kind of a demographic is it around there?

Captain Tatreau

Yeah, in Cesar's neighborhood of South Whittier, that is a lower income working class neighborhood. Primarily Hispanic. You know, you got multifamily is living in single and single residences, in some cases, and everybody's just looking out for each other. It's one of the older communities. It's kind of a throwback, where people would sit on the porch and you know, talk with the neighbor, and get to know each other and look out for one another.

Steve Gregory

What about the gang activity in the area? I'm told it is kind of an active area. Is that the case?

Captain Tatreau

Yeah, it's semi active. It depends what time of year and what's going on that particular South Whittier area does contain one local gang. It can get busy between that gang and a couple of rival gangs from the from the other areas. But yeah, it's not really much different than any other community in Southern California, really.

Steve Gregory

Well, then. Going back then this was 2011. We're talking about going from that point when you were Lieutenant, now to captain has much changed in Norwalk, South Whittier?

Captain Tatreau

Oh, yes, actually, crime has gone down over the past several years. It continues to decrease at a pretty good rate when LA County this year is up and violent crime overall. South Whittier and Norwalk station areas are actually down in crime, specifically violent crime. So in that we've got a bunch of hard working loyal deputy sheriff's that work Norwalk station that just want better for the people we serve.

Steve Gregory

Let's talk about Cesar's friend Larry Villegas, who was also killed that night. Do you know much about Larry and how those two know each other and knew each other?

Captain Tatreau

Yeah, thank you for bringing that up. Because Larry is another victim in this case. And he, you know, he was a another good young man. 24 years old, worked for a very big construction outfit as a mechanic and that outfit saw something in Larry to where they wanted to put him through additional schooling advanced schooling, because he was just that kind of guy. You know, he was a young dad had one on the way. And Cesar and Larry knew each other from from the local neighborhood, because that's the kind of neighborhood it is, despite their age difference. They see each other around and they're friendly with one another.

Steve Gregory

Do you stay in touch with either the families?

Captain Tatreau

I stay in touch mostly with Cesar's family, his mom and I, we speak at least, you know, two or three times a year. And you know, I made a vow to her that I would never forget this case that it's number one to me. And she she's just an exceptional woman.

Steve Gregory

What legacy does Cesar leave behind in both for you and for the station?

Captain Tatreau

A very important legacy is what he leaves behind. You know, Cesar was a family member, and we treat each other at Norwalk station like family. Whether you're a deputy sheriff, a volunteer, a reserve or an explorer, those people are as important and and they help us do what we need to do as a team. So in Cesar's case, his picture hangs prominently in our hallways where deputies pass it every single day and are reminded about Cesar. And we started a scholarship fund in Cesar's name that we give out to an explorer every year to help them get through school and to give them a leg up.

Steve Gregory

Who funds the scholarship?

Captain Tatreau

We do. We found it through fundraising and just donations from from station employees every year.

Steve Gregory

Really? That's, that's pretty amazing. And how much is the scholarship?

Captain Tatreau

It's \$4,000.

Steve Gregory

That's pretty good. And you've been doing it every year since every year since? Yes. About how many explorers go through your program?

Captain Tatreau

We usually have about 15 to 25 explorers. You know, this past year, it's been a difficult year because of COVID. But yeah, that's it's a pretty robust explorer program.

Steve Gregory

As we wrap this up, I want to ask, do you ever recall an instance or a situation where an explorer has been killed like this?

Captain Tatreau

I do not off the top of my head. But I believe that had happened once before, sadly. But I just can't remember the details.

Steve Gregory

It's interesting, because I saw photos from the memorial that I believe were posted on I think through the Sheriff's Department. They were posted, but I saw the photos. And what really struck me is the photos of deputies, and sergeants and lieutenants and captains who were visibly shaken by this. And I don't mean to minimize Cesar's role in this. But he was a he was a an explorer, and he wasn't killed in the line of duty. But he certainly got the sort of send off that someone who would have been killed in the line of duty would have gotten.

Captain Tatreau

That was important to us. As I said earlier, he was a family member to us, no matter his rank, or status there. And we had a for lack of a better word, a great funeral for Cesar and we continue to honor him. Every August with a with a march for justice through those streets. His mom organizes that we partner with her along with other law enforcement in the area, such as the California Highway Patrol, and about 100 neighbors and friends and we march through those streets and we end to a local park. And we have food and drink and we tell Cesar stories and we just try to keep his memory alive and keep it in the front of people's minds because we know people out, there's someone out there that knows what happened. There's there was more than one person involved in this thing. So it's it's been a long time but but it's important to us not to forget about.

Steve Gregory

Captain Jim Tatreau, Norwalk Station, LA County Sheriff's Department. Thank you for your insight, and we appreciate your time.

Captain Tatreau

Thank you, sir.

Steve Gregory

Coming up, we head to Montecito Heights where we highlight the tragic case of a young man who was visiting from Virginia, only to be shot while hiking on a trail in Debs Park. The case is in the hands of the LAPD but first, this is KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 7

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory and this is Unsolved. Next up, Los Angeles police department number OCB211210-1, the shooting death of Jason Cortez. This case takes us to 4235 Monterey Road the location of Deb's Park in Montecito Heights and the site where Cortez was killed. I was there the morning of December 17, 2021. You get to hear and experience what I did.

Press Conference Audio

Good morning. My name is Bill Cody. I am the senior field deputy for Gil Cedillo's office council district one for primarily for Northeast Los Angeles. And we are here today to announce upon the request of the Los Angeles Police Department, and Councilman Cedillo, who introduced a motion with the City Council that was adopted on December 8, for a \$50,000 reward for information on the unsolved murder of Jason Cortez. I'd like to start out by thanking you all for being here today. Because it's important that we get word of this reward out. I have some of the family here. And we just we need help from the

community in regards to this horrible murder that took place on September 10 of this year. Jason Cortez, a 29 year old male, he was hiking on a trail inside Deb's Park when he was shot in the back by an unknown suspect. Paramedics arrived but Mr. Cortez succumbed to his injuries on the trail. A witness came forward who provided a sketch of the suspect who saw someone in the bushes holding a rifle. That's the first time I got a chance to meet this family and hear about Jason and it sounds like he was really a special person. And so we really hope that this will help in solving this. And now I would like to introduce Captain Hurtado from Hollenbeck.

Captain Hurtado

I want to thank everybody for being here. This is really important that we try to catch the suspect who killed Jason. My name is Captain Hurtado and I work Hollenbeck division, commanding officer of Hollenbeck division. Deb's parks is a park, it's 300 acre park with five miles of hiking loop, and it's used by hundreds of Angelenos every day. The park provides an outlet for a lot of the community members and the visitors from the busy streets of Los Angeles to come out and get a hike. This could happen to anyone that came here. There's hundreds of 1000s of people that visit this park every day. And somebody out there has information that can lead to this arrest and this capture so we can make this park safe again, for the community. We can't allow crime and recidivism to take a hold of our parks and our communities. This is why we all have to work together. Safety is everybody's responsibility. And somebody out there has information and the know and knows what happened and who killed Jason. So we're asking everybody, there's a reward. There's an incentive. But I think the right thing to do is is somebody saw who killed Jason.

Steve Gregory

Cortez's father, mother and other family flew in from Virginia to be at this press conference.

Captain Hurtado

So right now, I'd like to introduce Jason's father Candelario, he's going to speak a little more about about his son.

Candelario Cortez

Hi, my name is Candelario Cortez. Here we meet my wife Reina, my son Jaime. First of all, I would like to say thank you, all of you for being here. Thanks the police department, LAPD, the detective working on the case. Want to thank you for doing all the effort and also the officer, Councilman Cedillo, thanks for all the support. We are here we to ask for help. We need the good of Los Angeles to help to find my son's killer. We asking everybody around who saw something or whatever little thing they think nothing but it could be something important. We need your help. They son was a very hardworking kid. He likes to be right behind the camera like you guys. He likes to film movies. He wrote a couple movies, short films. He liked photography also, he was taking pictures the day he was killed. So we we asked him the

people they helped to call it policy they heard something that they you know that it can help a case. That \$50,000 reward. Thanks for the police department, help us on that my wife wants to say something...

Reina Cortez

SPEAKS SPANISH

Steve Gregory

Candelario's wife doesn't speak English, but you don't have to know Spanish to understand her pain and suffering. She's visibly upset and crying and when she's done talking Candelario comes back up to the mic,

Candelario Cortez

This is the difficult time. This situation, we never imagined there will be please help us, please help me get some peace of mind. So if you have any information, please contact the detective.

Karina Solorzano

Good morning everyone. I am Karina Solorzano, Jason's wife, Jason and I met my sophomore year in college at George Mason University. From the moment Jason appeared in my life, everything made sense. Jason was my first boyfriend, and we dated throughout college. He brought so much joy to my life. We watched one another grow, and we grew alongside each other. After graduating college, we knew we wanted to be with each other forever. So after over five years together, we got engaged in January of last year, then the pandemic and we decided to get married as soon as possible. So We eloped on November 13, 2020. Marrying Jason on November 13 of last year was the best day of both of our lives. Shortly thereafter, we got our puppy Stella, being the filmmaker that Jason was he begged we named her Stella so he could yell out her name like Marlon Brando in "A Streetcar Named Desire". Jason loves Stella so much he was determined we get her a backyard so we purchased our first home in February of this year, and began planning to expand our family.

Steve Gregory

More on the life and tragic death of Jason Cortez, but first this is KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 8

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory and this is Unsolved. We're talking about the case of Jason Cortez, a 29 year old man who was killed in September of 2021 while hiking in Deb's Park in Montecito Heights. Before the break, we heard from an LA City Councilman, his rep who announced a \$50,000 reward. And we also heard from Cortez's father, mother and wife Karina, who had just been talking about her marriage to Jason and their life together.

Karina Solorzano

Jason made countless sacrifices for those he loved. Those sacrifices are what led him to LA to this very Park. He was helping, he was here helping a friend on a creative project. Anyone who knew Jason would tell you that he was not only a filmmaker, creator, musician, photographer, streamer, podcaster, and mentor, but more so he was loving, caring, kind, resilient, and full of life and happiness. Jason was the kind of person who put others before himself time and time again. Prior to getting our puppy Stella, he was actually afraid of dogs. But he knew that how happy would make me to have a puppy. He loved Stella so much. He insisted we tuck her into bed every night and give her a goodnight kiss. Now I have to tuck her in alone, and give her two kisses. One from me, and one from Jason. That's just one of the many things I have to do alone now. Jason was not only my husband, and an amazing son and brother, a loyal friend. This was supposed to be our first Christmas and New Year's together as a married couple. But now, celebrate without him in seven years. Jason's family and I are desperate for answers, and we need your help. We need to know who did this and why. We need to understand what happened. We need someone to pick up the phone or send an anonymous tip to give some information. If anyone out there has any information. No matter how small, we ask that you please come forward and let the LAPD know. If you have information and don't want to share your identity, know that you can share anonymously. But please come forward. Any information helps Jason's family and I cannot rest and be at peace until we know what happened to him. Jason did not deserve this. And his family and friends did not deserve this. Again, we are begging for your help. If you have any information, please reach out and call Detective at 213486 8700. Or if you would like to share anonymously, you can call 800-222-Tips or visit LA Crimestoppers.org. Lastly, we created a website to celebrate Jason's life, passions and to remember his legacy. If you'd like to learn more about Jason and who he was and his amazing life that he led, please visit celebratingJasonCortez.com. Thank you so much.

Detective Alex

Good morning. I want to thank everybody for coming out. First of all, my name is Detective Alex, I work LAPD Central Bureau homicide. I'm the investigating officer in this case. And I first want to say the \$50,000 reward that we're offering today is just an incentive. As Captain Hurtado said it's time for the people to do the right thing. And we're asking anybody with information. Regarding this case, the person responsible for the murder of Jason Cortez come forward. Again, that number I want to repeat it's 213-486-8700. And if you'd like to remain anonymous, that's 877-222-tips, that's 8477. If anybody has any questions...

Steve Gregory

The first question is in Spanish and the detective interprets for us

Detective Alex

The question was about the suspect, what information we have and what information is available with him. A witness came forward that day the day of the incident, and with his help we composed a composite sketch describing the male is approximately 5'10 to 5'11 height male, Hispanic in his 20s or 30s, wearing a blue hooded sweatshirt.

Steve Gregory

I asked about the witness and where he was.

Detective Alex

The witness was also a fellow hiker that was that crossed Jason's path that day. He didn't see the shooting hear heard. what sounded like a gunshot surely after that shot that witness ran to Jason and provided help and that witness at the same time saw a suspect poke out of the bushes just the I guess the upper torso part of his body didn't really get a good look at him, but saw him holding what appeared to be a long rifle. Approximately 75 to 100 feet away.

Steve Gregory

The detective was asked aboutCortez's connection to LA.

Detective Alex

Jason had no ties to Los Angeles, he was a native of Virginia. He was here strictly to take photos of the park. He was here with a friend and was just walking along the trail. The wrong place at the wrong.

Steve Gregory

I asked the detective about similar crimes in the area.

Detective Alex

Not inside the park and not on that trail. In the error. There has been a share of murders. But not inside the park. And like I said, not in the trail not in the afternoon the way Jason was shot that day. I don't want to speculate. Like I said, he's just that's what we have the information we have. We are following some more leads right now. It's unusual for a long rifle, especially. My estimation was at that person was

about 50-100 feet away as well. Not a close distance. It is a small caliber, possibly 22. And that's why it's important for anybody to come forward to help us out with any information

Steve Gregory

Detective, was asked about a possible motive for the shooting.

Detective Alex

Well, you know, this is another representation of just another senseless killing, there is no reason there's no motive behind this. It's something that I can't explain I I talked to the family and I communicate with them on a regular basis. And there's nothing that I can say that that will help them understand this. And that's the reason we're here today asking the public for help.

Steve Gregory

Another question in Spanish, he interprets.

Detective Alex

She asked if it was a any kind of gang motive or any kind of relation to the gangs and I explained that there are gangs that circle the park you know, Highland Park, Montecito El Cerino, Rose Hills. But this was this. This incident took place inside the park and I we don't believe it's getting motivated at all it like I said, I don't want to speculate. But Jason was obviously not a gang member and don't think it's gang motivated. Jason Cortez was not a native of Los Angeles. He was there visiting and he was hiking on a trail in a park when he was shot in the back

Steve Gregory

Surveillance cameras?

Detective Alex

Unfortunately, that trail in the park is pretty deep in the park. And like Kepner totl said it's a 300 acre park. There's just no surveillance cameras surrounding that that those trails are the entrances and the exits of the park.

Steve Gregory

And is there any homeless activity in the park?

Detective Alex

Unfortunately, yeah, there is a large homeless population down at the backside of the park. Mostly towards the base surrounding the freeways.

Steve Gregory

Did you interview all the homeless who live in that camp?

Detective Alex

Yes.

Steve Gregory

Did you find weapons

Detective Alex

not the weapon that were in particularly looking for.

Steve Gregory

Well, that's gonna do it. For more on this case and others go to our web page at KFIAM640.com keyword "unsolved". And don't forget to download and subscribe to our podcast on the iHeartRadio app. Unsolved with Steve Gregory is a production of the KFI News Department for iHeartMedia Los Angeles, Robin Bertolucci program director Chris Little, news director, the programs produced by Steve Gregory and Jacob Gonzalez. The digital producer is Andro Mammo. The field engineer is Tony Sorrentino, and the technical directors David Calloway coming up next, it's Coast to Coast but first this is KFI AM 640. Time now for news update.