

The Case of the Lunch-Time Shooting

What went wrong at a Lynwood restaurant remains a mystery

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A 23-year-old jewelry vendor fatally shot by an off-duty Los Angeles Police Department officer on April 26 had only a trace amount of alcohol in his blood.

Ruben Renteria Gonzalez, 23, had approached Officer Jose Cortez Amaya as he was having lunch on the patio at Lucy's Mexican Restaurant in Lynwood. When the officer showed no interest in buying jewelry, Gonzalez grew belligerent, the officer told investigators.

Amaya, who is 5-foot-5, said he fired his weapon when the 6-foot-2 Gonzalez confronted him, reaching for a shiny object in his pocket. According to a witness, the item turned out to be a Thunderbird bottle.

A witness had told police that Gonzalez purchased a bottle of fortified wine as he made his rounds selling jewelry in Lynwood. The allegation had offered a possible explanation for the stormy exchange between the two men.

Toxicological tests revealed no drugs and showed Gonzalez's blood-alcohol level was 0.02. The legal limit for driving in California is 0.08.

Gonzalez moved to Los Angeles two years ago and sold jewelry to support himself and relatives, including his mother, who remained in Mexico.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which has jurisdiction in Lynwood, has not completed its investigation of the shooting. According to a news release, Gonzalez grew agitated and threatening, especially after finding out that his prospective customer was a police officer.

According to the release, Amaya called 911 for help, presumably to avert violence, then shot the young man after Gonzalez "reached into his pants pocket and pulled out an object." The department won't comment on what the object was, other than to say it was not a gun; a witness interviewed by an investigator from the Consulate of Mexico, which looked into the case at the request of Gonzalez's family, said that it was a bottle of wine. The same witness said that the officer held on to the vendor's merchandise while telling Gonzalez to leave and threatened to shoot him if he didn't.

A copy of the 911 tape, obtained by the Weekly, revealed only two calls on the tape, one from a civilian and the other from Amaya, both made after the shooting. During the call, Amaya tells the dispatcher, "He tried to attack me and I just shot him." There was no mention of Gonzalez reaching for his pockets.

It may be hard to determine exactly what happened at Lucy's that day. According to Marco Lopez,

an attorney representing the Gonzalez family, there are only two known witnesses. One was a friend of Gonzalez's who accompanied the salesman on his trip to the territory assigned by his jewelry supplier; the other, a friend of Amaya's, who was eating lunch with the officer. Restaurant employees steadfastly maintain that they were inside or around the back of the restaurant and witnessed neither an argument nor the shooting, because they took place outside on the patio.

The shooting is also being investigated by LAPD's Robbery-Homicide and Internal Affairs divisions. Neither the LAPD nor the Sheriff's Department would comment on the case. Amaya, who joined the LAPD in October 1997, remains on duty.