

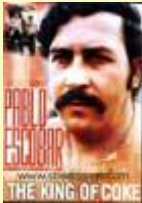
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GRAFFITI VANDALS GRADUATE TO GANG VIOLENCE

Byline: Michael Gougis Staff Writer

After a confrontation on a bus, Edgar Estrada was stabbed in the middle of the day on a public sidewalk, yards away from John Francis Polytechnic High School. His friends, members of a Pacoima gang, picked him up, took him home and planned their own form of justice.

Two days later, 15-year-old Santiago Polanco Jr. was dead, shot down in an alley behind the high school by Estrada's friends.

But this was not a typical gang retaliation. The people charged in Polanco's slaying were looking for revenge not on another gang, but on members of a so-called "tagger crew" that had graduated from spray cans to knives and attacked Estrada, prosecutors allege.

They failed to find anyone from that tagger crew - a group of graffiti vandals that calls itself "EK" or "Evil Kingdom," but they found Polanco. More than 15 months after the attack, police are still searching for the man they say pulled the trigger, a gang member the Los Angeles Police Department considers one of its most-wanted criminals.

Trial is set for May for three Valley men who, infuriated by the stabbing of their gang colleague, drove around and took potshots at a car before laying in wait for Polanco in December 2001, prosecutors allege.

Angel Rodriguez, 20, Mauricio Martin Montes, 19, and Christian Omar Hernandez, 20, each of Los Angeles, have been charged with murder and conspiracy, and each is being held on \$1 million bail. Juan Manuel Chavez, 22, who remains at large, also is charged with murder and conspiracy. Police believe he is still in the Valley.

All three defendants in custody have pleaded not guilty. Nancy Mazza, the defense attorney representing Montes, is asking the

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court to throw out her client's "voluntary" statements to police, saying that Montes was roused out of bed at 3 a.m., held for hours without food by police and coerced into implicating himself and others in the shooting.

"By the time the interrogation was over, if they wanted him to admit he was Saddam Hussein, he would have," Mazza said.

Many tagging crews, gang experts said, started out as alternatives to established gangs by kids who wanted to look like the "dangerous" types but didn't want to actually become gangsters.

"The younger generation tried to break away from the gang stigma," said LAPD Detective Andres Alegria, who has a longtime knowledge of Valley gangs. "But all that goes down the drain when they start acting like gangs. When their name gets scratched off a wall, they retaliate. Sometimes they'll just scratch off a name, sometimes they'll find the guy who did it and beat him up, and some of them are turning to shootings and murder."

In recent years, the difference between tagger crews and gangs "has become a very fine line. It's so vague that I don't know that law enforcement places much emphasis on any difference nowadays," said [Wes McBride](#), a retired Los Angeles Sheriff's Department sergeant who worked gang crimes for years in [East Los Angeles](#) and who now serves as president of the California Gang Investigators Association. "There used to be differences in attire, style. Now, it primarily has to do with how they name themselves. Gangs name themselves geographically."

Since Polanco's death, members of tagger crews have played the role of victim and perpetrator in Valley slayings, police said.

In February, two gunmen stormed into a North Hollywood party, hunted down 17-year-old Sergio Gutierrez - who police said was a member of a tagger crew - and pumped at least 17 shots into him, killing him on the spot. Ironically, police were investigating whether that shooting was related to a fight a week earlier at Francis Polytechnic.

And last April, a member of a tagger crew drew a gun at a birthday party in Granada Hills and killed a 19-year-old Whittier man.

[Alex Alonso](#), a doctoral student at the University of Southern California and a widely recognized expert on local gangs, said not all tagger crews evolve into full-blown gangs, but it happens

regularly.

“They do it for legitimacy, for respect,” Alonso said. “Most taggers aren't necessarily territorial. They want to tag all over the city. It's those crews that stick to a specific area - a corner, a neighborhood - that become gangs. And the area they try to establish themselves is usually someplace already claimed by another gang. That's where the conflicts start.”

In a strict legal sense, a tagging crew differs from a gang in the scope of its criminal operations. Gangs are usually defined as groups organized primarily for the purpose of ongoing criminal activity far beyond the level of violence involved in tagging.

“Generally speaking, a tagging crew by definition is not violent,” McBride said. “But they're just a step away. A lot of gangs started as tagging crews, and then something like this happens.

“Their image of themselves is that they're not violent and they don't do the robberies, the rapes, the crimes we associate with street gangs. But given the proper circumstances, they can be as violent as any gang. Traditionally, they either begin retaliating, they disappear, or they are absorbed into an established gang.”

Initially, it was nothing more than a logical guess by police that linked Estrada's stabbing to Polanco's death. On a hunch, detectives and officers went looking for the victim of a stabbing two days before the shooting. They found him in a hospital; his wound had worsened into a serious medical condition. He wouldn't talk to police. He was surrounded by shaven-head members of his gang, authorities said.

“He was sort of uncooperative, to say the least,” said Deputy District Attorney Beth Silverman, who is prosecuting the case. Silverman said that no one has been charged with Estrada's stabbing.

Two days later, on Dec. 13, Chavez, Hernandez and Montes piled into a green Jeep Cherokee driven by Rodriguez, according to prosecutors. Hernandez brought the gun along, and as they cruised along, he handed it to Montes, who shot at a car that they believed was carrying rival gang members, Silverman said.

After that, they drove to the alley behind Francis Polytechnic and waited. Shortly after 11:30 a.m., Polanco and some friends walked past the Jeep. Polanco had left the school in the middle of the day.

He wasn't a known gang member, and he was not a member of or associated with the ``Evil Kings," but he may have been associated with gang members or known the people responsible for the Estrada stabbing, Alegria said.

And he was ``dressed down," Silverman said, adding that ``Hispanic males in the Valley who walk around with shaved heads and dressed down have problems."

That was enough, Silverman said, to make him a target.

Polanco's mother, Anna Ornelas, can't talk about her son's death without crying. Closure, someone once said, is a word used by people who've never suffered a tragedy such as the slaying of their child.

``I try not to cry in front of the other kids (Polanco had a brother and a sister, and Ornelas helps care for one of her grandchildren)," she said. ``But it's hard not having him here anymore. I go through this every day - if they saw him leaving the school, why didn't they stop him? Why didn't they call me? Why him? It's like they took my life away."

The next hearing in the case is set for May 7.

CAPTION(S):

photo

Photo:

Juan Manuel Chavez

Wanted in slaying