

WITNESS DETAILS HIS LINK TO MURDER PLOT

MS-13 associate also tells about brutalizing rivals

BY ROBERT E. KESSLER
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An MS-13 associate testified Tuesday that he overcame his reluctance to kill a gang rival because a part of MS-13's code required following orders of top gang leadership in El Salvador, who, he was told, approved of the murder plot and wanted it carried out as planned.

Kevin Cifuentes, 25, testified that he did not have trouble following MS-13's brutal code of killing rivals and savagely beating those who showed disrespect. But Cifuentes, testifying



as a government witness at the trial of a fellow gang associate, said he was reluctant to immediately murder the rival gang member because too many witnesses and surveillance cameras were at the site of the proposed crime.

He took part in the killing, he said, because part of the gang's code required following the orders of the top leadership in El Salvador. He said the local Long Island leaders of his Brentwood MS-13 clique told him the "homeboys" approved of the plot and wanted it carried out.

Cifuentes' initial reluctance proved correct, if not because

of his reasoning: Suffolk police responding to the January 2017 slaying of Esteban Alvarado-Bonilla, at a deli in Central Islip, recognized Cifuentes as a member of MS-13, and assumed he had something to do with the killing, he testified in federal court in Central Islip.

Alvarado-Bonilla was believed to be a member of the rival 18th Street gang and was wearing the No. 18 football jersey of former NFL star Peyton Manning, a favored apparel of that gang.

Cifuentes, posing as a customer, had helped coordinate the killing from inside the deli, and had stayed at the scene as the gang's observer of the incident, he said, under questioning by federal prosecutor Raymond Tierney. Tierney is prosecuting the case with Michael Keilty.

While questioning Cifuentes,

Tierney played videos of the killing, and of the alleged killers coming to and leaving the scene, from surveillance cameras at the deli and from nearby cameras at homes and a gas station.

Cifuentes was known by investigators to have been involved in an earlier beating at a Brentwood restaurant of a man and his uncle who had shown what was considered disrespect toward MS-13, he said. And when police showed up at the deli, they said he must have had something to do with the killing, he said.

"You had left a man almost dead at the Super Taco," one of the officers told him, referring to the December 2016 incident.

"It was all over for me," Cifuentes said and added, referring to investigators, "they had already figured it out." In return for protection for himself and his

family, Cifuentes said, "I made the most difficult decision of my life — to become a snitch."

Cifuentes has been testifying at the trial of an alleged MS-13 associate, Jose Suarez, who is also accused of taking part in the Alvarado beating and the earlier attack on the uncle and nephew at the Super Taco.

Cifuentes is the third person affiliated with MS-13 to testify at the trial as a government witness who not only provided evidence against the defendant, but also provided detailed insight into the gang's operation — its code of brutality toward rivals and its hierarchical structure.

Suarez has maintained his innocence, and his attorney, Raymond Colon of Manhattan, said he is only being prosecuted because of his friendship with MS-13 members.

Whistleblower investigation lawyer defends its legitimacy

BY RICK BRAND
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The lawyer for the Suffolk Legislature's whistleblower probe on Tuesday defended the legitimacy of the investigation into the promotion of the nephew of the county police chief of detectives, and filed his final report on the matter.

During a 90-minute appearance before lawmakers, outside counsel Joel R. Weiss sought to rebut a letter from David Kelley, a former U.S. Attorney representing the county in the matter.

Kelley had urged the Legislature to drop its investigation. He also said legislative Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory (D-Copiague) could have a legal conflict of interest and could obstruct a federal review of the promotion.

Weiss produced a May 9 email from Carolyn Weiss, a Justice Department lawyer involved with the federal consent decree dealing with discrimination in police hiring.

"We have not found our separate investigatory jurisdictions to be in conflict as they are exercised simultaneously," Weiss wrote. "Therefore, we do not see your investigation as an impediment to our review."

After Weiss finished his public testimony, he continued to



Joel R. Weiss

meet in closed session with lawmakers for two hours. Later, Gregory revealed that Weiss had filed his confidential report on the promotion issue, which had been raised by a whistleblower. Gregory declined to make the report public.

Move to rescind transfer

However, Gregory said he will introduce a resolution to rescind the transfer of Salvatore Gigante, a police sergeant who is the nephew of Chief of Detectives Gerard Gigante, into an elite district attorney detective squad.

Gregory said Police Commis-



DuWayne Gregory

sioner Geraldine Hart would be asked to testify before lawmakers about the transfer.

Gregory also said he would propose legislation to tighten the county nepotism law, which requires legislative approval when relatives of high ranking officials are hired or promoted into non-civil service posts.

Gigante became a sergeant last August as a result of a civil service exam. Police officials later selected him to become a detective sergeant in the DA's police squad because of his past experience with the unit.

Gigante was transferred to the DA's office Jan. 2. He kept



Jon Kaiman

his sergeant's rank with no raise because the legislature had not yet approved a nepotism resolution to authorize the promotion.

Resolution withdrawn

The administration of County Executive Steve Bellone withdrew the resolution March 19 when Justice Department officials told the county they were reviewing Gigante's transfer.

During Joel Weiss's legislative testimony Tuesday, Gregory clashed with Deputy County Executive Jon Kaiman, saying the Bellone administra-

tion, police officials and District Attorney Tim Sini had refused to cooperate with Weiss's probe.

Gregory also said Kelley has his own potential conflict as Sini's former campaign chairman.

"They should clean up their own house and stop acting like the Soprano crime family," Gregory said.

"The District Attorney's Office will not engage with or be distracted by political grandstanding of any sort," said Sini's communications director, Sheila Kelly.

"While Mr. Gregory's comments were inappropriate, untrue, and hateful toward Italian Americans, we remain focused on impartially serving the residents of Suffolk County and will not allow any politician to politicize law enforcement in our County," Kelly said.

Kaiman also countered, citing Gregory's potential conflict as a possible witness in the whistleblower probe.

Separately, Kaiman and John Cowie, Suffolk Superior Officers Association president, acknowledged the union has a grievance against the county over Gigante's transfer to the DA's police squad. They said the issue is whether Gigante has the authority to supervise detectives as a sergeant.