

20 Years Ago, Shooting Death Drove City's War On Gang Violence



On March 26, 1994, 7-year-old Marcelina Delgado was killed when her family was caught in the crossfire of two notorious Hartford gangs.



By **Jenna Carlesso**

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1994 shooting death of little girl sparked the federal government's war on gangs in Hartford #Courant250

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HARTFORD — She was a shy, playful first-grader at Parkville Community School. She had long, shiny black hair and a broad smile.

But when she was gunned down on March 26, 1994, 7-year-old Marcelina Delgado became the catalyst that drove the federal government's war on gangs in Hartford.

"There were a lot of deaths, but hers was a shocking death," Christopher Lyons, who headed the Hartford gang task force in the 1990s, recalled in a recent interview. "You have to imagine one of the worst crimes that you can. The air was heavy; there was tension everywhere. It basically brought the whole city together against these guys."

Marcelina, her two sisters and her parents were dropping off groceries to her grandmother on the day of the little girl's death. Her family drove from their Park Street apartment to the Charter Oak Terrace housing project in a borrowed gray Toyota.

When they arrived, Marcelina's mother, Maria Delgado, knocked on the door. No one answered, so she returned to the car and asked her husband to take them home.

Then a red vehicle pulled alongside them and opened fire.

Maria Delgado told a federal jury in 1996 that she pulled her husband, Angel, out of the car and toward a building.

She thought the girls followed, but only 9-year-old Maria and 4-year-old Rosana were with her. Delgado ran back to the car to look for Marcelina. She was there, still in her seat. She had been shot in the head.

A bullet also struck Angel Delgado.

Police said at the time that the Delgados were caught in the crossfire of two notorious Hartford gangs — Los Solidos and the Latin Kings.

The Solidos shot the Delgados in an attack on a car mistakenly thought to be carrying rival Latin Kings. The Delgados had no gang involvement, police said.

Angel Delgado recovered from his injury. Marcelina died three days later.

Shootings On The Rise

Although gangs had been in Hartford for decades, their presence was overwhelmingly felt in 1993 and 1994, when intense violence erupted on city streets. The violence claimed dozens of lives — those of gang members and innocent bystanders.

Los Solidos, Spanish for the Solid Ones, formed in state prisons in the early 1990s. Its membership included remnants of two once-powerful gangs — the Savage Nomads and the Ghetto Brothers.

The Latin Kings started in Chicago in the 1940s. By 1990, the group had spread to Connecticut, where its strongest foothold also was in the prisons.

Both gangs flourished behind bars, recruiting new members by offering protection against assault and thefts. Their street presence grew as inmates spilled back into society.

By the summer of 1992, Los Solidos had more than 300 members in Hartford — its home base. The Latin Kings had at least 2,000 statewide.

Los Solidos were reportedly linked to at least two Hartford drive-by shootings in July 1992. Luis Rojas, an 18-year-old city resident who said he had been shot in a July 12 drive-by, told The Courant that Los Solidos "want to be known here. They are the new gang and are trying to take over."

The city's police department set up a special task force to address the rising tide of gang violence.

During a 10-week period, police said in October 1992, the task force arrested more than 150 people on 230 felony charges; seized 48 high-powered weapons, a live hand grenade and numerous machetes; confiscated thousands of dollars in narcotics; and caught a convicted murderer.

"I think we had a great impact," Lyons said. "We had them nervous."

Quiet returned to Hartford, but not for long.

On June 8, 1993, a major battle broke out between Los Solidos and the Latin Kings, turning the streets in and around Frog Hollow into a shooting gallery.

At least four people were shot that day — one fatally by a police officer. Police scrambled as reports of gunfire came in from Park Street, Seymour Street, Madison Street, School Street, Wethersfield Avenue and different areas of the Charter Oak Terrace housing project. More than a dozen arrests were made.

"The city basically exploded," Lyons said. "I could be anywhere from Frog Hollow to Asylum Hill and hear gunfire."

Members of the gang task force told The Courant that the fight was linked to a simmering dispute between Los Solidos and the Latin Kings that started over a girl.

The violence continued through the summer and fall. By early September, at least eight more people had been shot, including a 60-year-old woman who was cleaning the front porch of her Zion Street home. Residents dove for cover during a three-day spate of shootings from late August into early September that included several drive-bys.

Heavily armed police officers flooded the streets in and around the Frog Hollow and South Green neighborhoods as plainclothes investigators searched for gang members and weapons. At city hall, officials agreed to pay for extra police presence.

The task force swelled. The group that started with just four Hartford police officers added at least six, and welcomed assistance from state police, FBI, DEA and inspectors from the chief state's attorney's office.

Then-Hartford Police Chief Jesse Campbell planned a gang resistance program. The state's top prosecutors announced that they would combat violence by seeking higher bonds and longer prison sentences.

The city asked Gov. Lowell P. Weicker to send 42 state troopers to help curb the shootings.

With the help of state authorities, the city launched a crackdown on the gangs called Operation Liberty. A curfew was enforced and police conducted predawn raids on apartment buildings.

Shootings ebbed. In the first week of Operation Liberty, police made more than 100 arrests and stopped between 200 and 300 cars.

But tension between the gangs persisted.

Lyons, then a sergeant in the Hartford Police Department, told The Courant in an Aug. 19, 1993, article that despite gang leaders' claims that they had instructed members not to be aggressive, the members continued to fight.

"They say one thing to the public and tell the gang members to keep doing what they are doing," he said. "It will take an innocent person or baby to get shot dead for the public to wake up about these gangs."

Federal Response

The following spring, Marcelina Delgado was killed.

Dressed in a white gown and gloves, she was laid to rest on April 2, 1994. Before her burial, someone put a pink stuffed bunny in her casket.

Marcelina wasn't the first innocent bystander to be killed in the gangs' crossfire.

Twenty-two-year-old Samuel Arroyo was mistaken for a gang member when he was shot in the city's Parkville neighborhood on Sept. 4, 1993. Nearly three months later, George "Coco" Hall, 17, was slain in a drive-by shooting on Cotswold Street.

But the little girl's death galvanized an unprecedented federal attack on street violence in Hartford.

Federal agents descended on Hartford like an avenging army. Top law enforcement officials implored residents to help identify the gunman who shot the 7-year-old.

"The magnifying glass was on Hartford after that murder," Lyons recalled. "It took that for people to wake up to these guys."

In December 1995, a federal grand jury charged seven members of Los Solidos in Marcelina's killing, as well as in the shooting deaths of three men in Hartford. The grand jury charged Ralph "Ralphie" Moreno, Angel "Glazer" Torres, Michael Armstrong and an unnamed juvenile with participating in the drive-by shooting that claimed Marcelina's life.

At a hearing that December, Deputy U.S. Attorney John Durham said the day of Marcelina's killing began with a hostage situation in which a member of Los Solidos was being held by the Latin Kings in the Charter Oak housing project.

It ended with a directive by Los Solidos leaders to seek revenge on the Latin Kings. Instead, they opened fire on a car carrying the Delgado family.

At his trial in 1996, authorities identified Moreno as the gunman who fired the fatal shot. He was sentenced to life in prison.

Jorge "Pekino" Rivera, president of Los Solidos during the gang's 1993-94 turf war with the Latin Kings, received 13 life sentences. A jury in 1996 found that Rivera gave orders that resulted in four Hartford homicides, including the death of Marcelina.

Armstrong was sentenced to 22 ½ years behind bars for his role as an accomplice in the killing. Travis Dailey, another gang member who hid the gun used in the fatal drive-by, was sentenced to 135 months in prison.

From the time of Marcelina's murder to the fall of 1996, more than 50 Hartford members or former members of Los Solidos were indicted and convicted at U.S. District Court on narcotics, weapons and racketeering charges.

"It's a complete 180 from when Marcelina was killed," then-Hartford Police Chief Joseph Croughwell said of the gang situation in November 1996. "I'm not saying the gangs have gone away, but the level of violence is nowhere near where it was."

The day that Moreno was sentenced, U.S. Attorney Christopher F. Droney and Croughwell told Marcelina's parents that their daughter did not die in vain.

"We feel that lives have been saved," Droney said.

Changing Strategy

The city's landscape has changed since the 1990s. Gone are the gang members who proudly sported their colors and symbols on the streets. The large, highly organized gangs have been replaced by smaller, less formal groups that occupy individual blocks instead of entire neighborhoods.

The groups are closely monitored by police, who interrupt or prevent violence through proactive efforts.

"We learned a lot of lessons," Hartford Police Chief James C. Rovella said recently. "In the '90s ... we never paid attention to the little groups that popped up until they committed a crime, and then it was reactive.

"We try to get out in front of problems now, even out in front of prevention."

In 2011, the city formed a shooting task force to quell gun violence. Hartford police collaborated with representatives from the chief state's attorney's office, state police, the Department of Correction, DEA and

suburban police departments.

The department also launched a program to work with probationers, and is part of a statewide effort known as Project Longevity that targets the most violent offenders.

"We only teamed up in the old days after something bad happened," Rovella said. "Everybody's resources are valuable, but when you start to mix them they become even more valuable."

Gang members have changed, too.

The people who belong to the smaller groups prefer to stay out of the spotlight, so they can sell drugs without drawing the attention of police.

In the 1990s, "there was no respect for law enforcement, no respect for human life, for the community," Rovella said. "The groups nowadays would rather fly under the radar. Business is more important to them than exposure."

These days, any coordinated gang effort would be quickly recognized and addressed by police, he said, given their ties to community groups.

"We'd be way out in front of it."

A Life Remembered

Marcelina Delgado is buried in the back of Bloomfield's Mount St. Benedict Cemetery, grave No. 11,170. Her marker says "Querida Hija" — beloved daughter.

In the wake of her death, a crisis-intervention program was started. Hartford got more community police. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development promised \$19 million toward renovating part of Charter Oak Terrace. A flowering pear tree was planted at Parkville Community School.

But two decades on, family members are still mourning her loss.

"We are not the same family as before," Maria Delgado, Marcelina's mother, said in a recent interview.

"Everything changed. We try to just keep going, but it's hard. I know she'll always be in my heart."

Rosana Delgado, now 25, was 4 when her sister died, but she recalls vividly the times that they would jump on the bed and play together. The hardest part, she said, is thinking about the life Marcelina didn't get to live.

"We all have kids now," she said. "She didn't get a chance to be an adult, to be a mother.

"My parents are still grieving over it. They will never let that go."

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