

NOTE: This exclusive investigation about the infamous and corrupt Cameron County sheriff was the result of pouring over hundreds of documents. I conceived the "spider web" graphic which was brought to life by our artist Gilbert Zarate.

Intricate web links Cantu, criminals and their lawyers

Gamez will sit out proceedings against Cantu because of former client's connection

By *SERGIO CHAPA*
The Brownsville Herald

June 13, 2005 — Ernesto Gamez is expected to be in court today for Conrado Cantu's arraignment but the ex-lawman's longtime attorney won't represent the former sheriff in what could be the legal fight of his life.

Court records show that Gamez has a conflict of interest in Cantu's case because he represented one of four convicted drug traffickers who allegedly gave Cantu tens of thousands of dollars to look the other way while he was in office.

According to a weighty federal grand jury indictment unsealed Thursday, Cantu and four others are accused of using the sheriff's office to commit various acts of racketeering, extortion, money laundering and trafficking cocaine.

A Brownsville Herald investigation reveals an intricate web linking Cantu, criminals named in his indictment and their attorneys, dating back years.

Federal court records show Rolando Curiel and his wife Marisela were arrested for trafficking cocaine on Aug. 26, 1996.

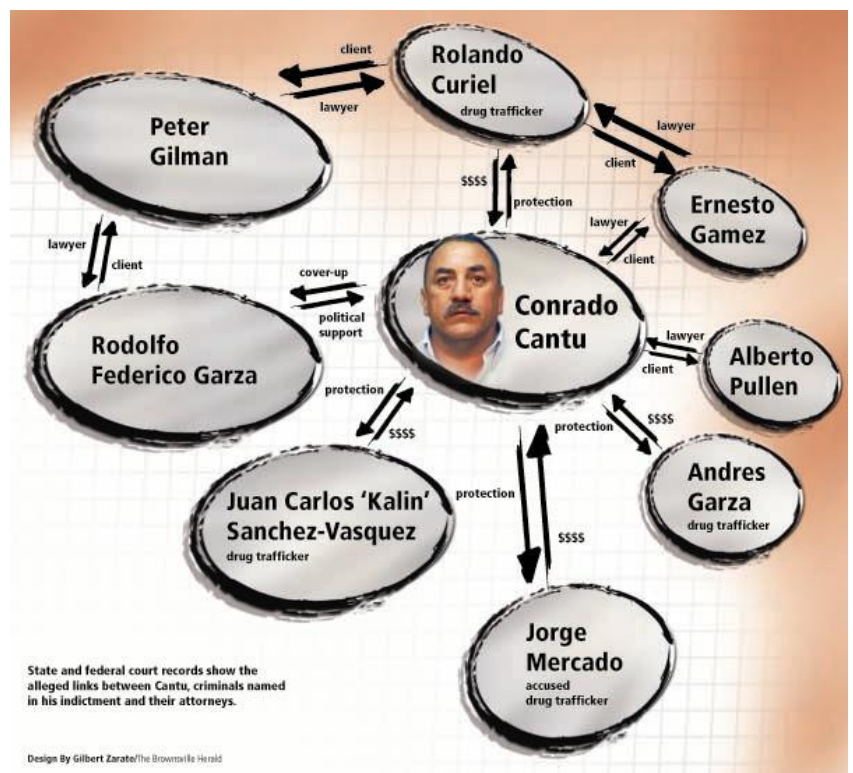
Brownsville lawyer Peter Gilman defended Marisela Curiel, while Gamez defended Rolando Curiel.

The indictment against Cantu accuses him of taking thousands of dollars from Curiel and at least three other convicted drug traffickers seeking protection for their operations.

On Thursday, Cantu's defense attorney Alberto Pullen said his client's longtime adviser Gamez could not represent him in this case because of an alleged conflict of interest but would not elaborate.

Gamez also stayed quiet this past week about the alleged conflict and his role in the Curiel case.

Gamez has defended Cantu in various civil and criminal cases, including two that remain pending in state district court.



But according to Texas judicial ethics and rules of conduct, attorneys cannot represent opposing parties in a criminal case or civil lawsuit because they could use their knowledge from their former clients to unfair advantage.

The indictment against Cantu puts Gamez's one-time client Curiel in a position to testify against the former sheriff and places Gamez on the sidelines in this case.

The lawyer who scribed the words "Justice for All" on his office building said this week that he would be an "unofficial" participant in the Cantu case and added Friday that he "must abide by the ethics."

Political observers see Gamez's withdrawal from the case as a blow to Cantu's defense.

"Gamez is a major legal figure," said Tony Knopp, a social sciences professor at the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College.

"Not having him on your team is a disadvantage."

Gamez said Thursday that Pullen was the right man for the job.

"He (Cantu) has hired a younger, smarter guy," he said in a meeting room where the men reviewed the 45-page indictment against Cantu.

Ties to traffickers

Rolando Curiel, a 32-year-old Brownsville man, served 12 months in a rehabilitation center and received three years probation for the 1996 drug trafficking charge through a plea agreement.

Court records show that he returned to trafficking cocaine and marijuana sometime after that. A federal investigation indicates that Curiel paid Cantu \$23,000 between February and October 2001 to protect his operation.

The costly bribe alleged in the federal indictment did not keep Curiel and three others from a December 2002 arrest on federal drug trafficking and money laundering charges in Corpus Christi.

Gilman represented Curiel in the 2002 case despite a federal prosecutor's request to disqualify the lawyer because he had argued a previous case for co-defendant Luis Raul Estrada.

Gilman remained on the case after Estrada insisted he had little contact with his former attorney and entered a plea agreement at the court's reluctance.

A March 27, 2003 plea arranged by Gilman suggests that Curiel may have turned against Cantu in order to reduce a 17-year prison term and eight-year probation sentence.

The plea agreement promises a reduced sentence in exchange for testimony against other accused criminals.

Some records regarding Curiel's sentencing remain sealed.

But the indictment against Cantu shows that an undercover investigation against the former sheriff began after Curiel and two others were arrested or convicted on drug charges.

Court records show federal authorities arrested Jorge Mercado in May 2002 and Andres Garza in January 2003 on drug charges. Both are named in the indictment against Cantu that claims they bribed him in exchange for

safeguarding their deals.

Cantu and four others were arrested four weeks after Juan Carlos “Kalin” Sanchez Vasquez entered a plea agreement in federal court for cocaine trafficking and money laundering charges.

Sanchez, who was arrested with 11 others in February, is also said to have bribed Cantu.

Plea, politics linked

Gilman represented a second man identified in the indictment against Cantu, according to court records.

Rodolfo Federico Garza, 66, was accused of evading arrest for a kidnapping charge on March 1, 2004 and pulling a shotgun on the sheriff’s SWAT team.

One of the deputies fired several shots in response and Garza was arrested.

Federal authorities allege that he was taken to Cantu’s house nearby and ordered released because he was a friend and political ally of the then-sheriff.

The federal indictment against Cantu accuses him and his former captain Rumaldo Rodriguez of attempting a cover-up to hide the incident. Garza was eventually charged with evading arrest and aggravated assault of a public servant.

The felony charges were reduced to a misdemeanor charge of fleeing a police officer in a March 7 plea agreement arranged by Gilman and entered before Judge Leonel Alejandro in the 357th state District Court.

County Court at-Law Judge *Janet Leal* sentenced Garza to 18 months deferred adjudication and a \$2,000 fine for the charge.

Gilman could not be reached for comment on this article.

First Assistant District Attorney John Blaylock said he could not comment on Garza’s case at this time “out of respect for the federal prosecution.”

See indictment:

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