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Deputy's Rape Victim Recalls Ordeal

Woman describes the attack by the lawman, who was convicted this week, and the years of torment that followed.

March 02, 2006 | Hector Becerra | Times Staff Writer

In the early-morning darkness, the woman saw the deputy's cruiser bob through her rearview mirror, spanning first one city, then a second, before reaching the edge of a third.

On a near-empty street not far from her South Gate home, the lawman stopped her, then ordered her into his vehicle.

For more than an hour, he meandered around that city, asking questions -- where she worked, where she lived. He made a point to drive by those places.

The deputy then stopped in an isolated industrial yard near Tweedy Boulevard and Atlantic Avenue, parking between cargo containers. He ordered her to take off her clothes.

"I asked him, 'Why are you doing this?' " the 42-year-old beauty parlor owner and mother of two said Wednesday. "He would not talk. He just kept raping me. I couldn't run. He was armed. He was a cop."

For months, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy Gabriel Gonzalez prowled the streets of Compton and surrounding cities during his early-morning patrol shifts. In at least three cases, prosecutors said, he stopped women as they drove or walked alone, ordering them to strip before he sexually abused or raped them. Several other women who said they were victimized by him testified in the trial, but no charges were filed in their cases.

This week, a federal court jury convicted the 38-year-old deputy, a Chino Hills resident, of civil rights violations in the three cases. The deputy, who had been free on a \$900,000 bond during the trial and was taken into custody after his conviction, faces up to life in federal prison when sentenced May 22.

Gonzalez could not be reached for comment. A call to his attorney was not returned.

Sheriff's officials said the allegations against Gonzalez almost immediately rang true.

"We were convinced that we had a very, very bad deputy in our employment, and we worked aggressively and vigorously to find the truth of this matter," said Sheriff's Chief Bill McSweeney, who oversees litigation involving the department. "We obtained some physical evidence that was almost irrefutable by the defense."

In the offices of a Montebello law firm, the rape victim spoke out, her voice trembling. She said she came forward in hopes of coaxing any other possible victims to come out.

By her own admission, the woman -- a single mother of two teenage boys -- said her coming forward involved a great deal of serendipity. For six months after the attack, which took place in the summer of 2002, she kept silent. She was embarrassed, didn't want her kids to know and worried what the deputy would do if she came forward.

"I was very afraid. He knew where I worked and where I lived," the woman said. "And I had two boys. I did not want to expose them to danger."

Then, about six months after the rape, South Gate was conducting telephone surveys about its Police Department.

The woman said she mistakenly thought that the person who raped her was a South Gate officer because of where she had been pulled over.

In a moment of outrage, she vented about the attack.

A South Gate police investigator followed up on her complaint and then referred the case to the Sheriff's Department. Two of its investigators were struck by the similarities between that case and other allegations involving Gonzalez.

The woman was able to identify Gonzalez through a photo lineup of six deputies. As an added measure, she was shown photos of every South Gate police officer.

The Sheriff's Department and the FBI each launched investigations.

"He didn't even need to tell these women not to say anything and not to report what he'd done," said Assistant U.S. Atty. Caroline C. Wittcoff. "He knew they were so afraid of him and so intimidated, that he believed that either they would not come forward ... or they wouldn't be believed if they did."

Surveillance video from a business, a computer check Gonzalez ran from his patrol car on one of the victims and fingerprints were among the evidence that tied him to at least two other attacks, Wittcoff said.

In addition to the South Gate beautician, the jury found him guilty of sexually abusing two other women while on patrol.

The beautician said her ordeal began as she returned home after a night dancing with friends. She spotted the sheriff's cruiser following her on Imperial Highway. It was about 3 a.m.

When he finally pulled her over at Imperial and Bullis Street in Lynwood near the South Gate border, he accused her of being drunk. According to court records, he performed sobriety tests on her, which she passed.

Despite this, he put her in the back of his black-and-white cruiser without handcuffing her.

"He told her he needed to take her to the station to have a female check her, but instead," court records state, "he drove her around in circles, repeatedly asking her for 'information.' "

It was a routine, prosecutors said, similar to what other victims had described. He refused to tell the woman what kind of information he wanted.

The woman said she told Gonzalez that if he "believed she was drunk, he should take her to the police station."

According to court records, the deputy "told her that if he took her in, she would lose her license and be put in jail."

Nevertheless, Wittcoff said, the woman repeatedly pleaded for him to take her to the police station.

At the deserted container yard, Gonzalez told her to remove all of her clothing.

"He said he needed me to undress so he could check me for drugs," she recalled. "I told him I didn't have any drugs, that I had two boys and my business."

The deputy took his flashlight and used it ostensibly to search her private parts. Then he ordered her out of the car and told her to turn around so he could check her some more.

That's when Gonzalez raped her.

"Even in the final moments, I had the hope that he would not harm me," she said, her voice breaking. "He was a cop."

Eventually, he drove her back to her car.

"When a woman is violated like that, it's the worst humiliation and the most painful thing that can happen to you," she said. "I would fall into depressions. It was such a huge wound, and it felt like it was constantly opening and closing. It's a wound without a cure."

She said that nearly four years later, she still relives the attack.

"You live with this 24 hours a day," she said. "In the restroom, when you're cooking, when you sleep, you live with this. Sometimes, I feel like it's better if they kill you than have to live with such a large wound."

By coming forward, she expressed hope that other women who may have been abused by Gonzalez would do likewise.

If there are other victims, "I want to tell them to defeat their fear," she said. "I want to tell them to scream out their fear and their truth. Because only by doing that can you live a little."