

Convicted killer executed after courts reject appeals

By Cindy Tumiel
STAFF WRITER

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Carlos DeLuna was put to death early today for the robbery and slaying of a Corpus Christi service station attendant whose pleas for mercy were monitored by a police emergency dispatcher. Texas prison officials administered the lethal injection at 12:14 a.m. to DeLuna, 27, who had been sentenced to die for the Feb. 4, 1983, stabbing death of Wanda Jean Lopez, 24, at the Sigmor service station, 2602 S. Padre Island Drive.

DeLuna was pronounced dead at 12:24 a.m.

Before dying, DeLuna gave a short statement to those present.

"I want to say I hold no grudges. I hate nobody. I want my family to know I love them. I want to tell everyone on death row to keep the faith up - to keep going. Everything will be all right," he said.

When the injection was given, DeLuna took three deep breaths, then there was no further movement. He was pronounced dead 10 minutes later.

The U.S. Supreme Court, on a 7-2 vote late yesterday, rejected an emergency request aimed at keeping DeLuna alive until a formal appeal could be filed in his behalf. On Tuesday, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals also refused to block the execution.

DeLuna has continued to maintain his innocence, claiming that the murder was committed by a friend named Carlos Hernandez.

But those whose lives were touched by the crime doubt the story.

"He'll be lying until he dies," said Mary Vargas, Lopez' mother. "He'll lie like he's been lying. Now he has to pay for what he did to my daughter."

Mary Vargas and her husband, Louis, refused interviews yesterday, saying they wanted to protect the privacy of Wanda Lopez' 12-year-old daughter, Melissa.

The girl, who was 6 when her

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mother was killed, now lives with her grandparents.

Evidence in the July 1983 trial included a dramatic tape recording of Lopez' last words - her frantic conversation with a police dispatcher, and her hysterical pleas for mercy.

"You want it, I'll give it to you. I'll give it to you. I'm not going to do nothing to you. Please!" Lopez said just before she was stabbed.

After the plea, there were sounds of a struggle and one long, piercing scream, followed by sobbing and a low moan.

Jesse Escochea, the former Corpus Christi police dispatcher who talked with Lopez, recalls the event as one of the most memorable in his 13 years as a dispatcher.

Lopez had called police to report that a man with a knife was inside the store.

"It seemed like a routine call, up until the time she started screaming. That's when I knew something had gone wrong," said Escochea, now a dispatcher with the Los Angeles Police Department.

It wasn't until a police unit arrived at the scene and called for an ambulance that Escochea learned Lopez had been fatally

wounded.

"That's when we found out she was injured," he said. "That's when our adrenalin got pumping. We had every unit in the city looking for him (DeLuna)."

Police found DeLuna hiding underneath a car, several blocks from the murder scene.

Steve Schiwetz, who prosecuted the case as an assistant district attorney, said DeLuna was a repeat offender who deserved the death sentence imposed by the jury.

DeLuna had served time for car theft and attempted rape, and had tried to rape a 54-year-old widow two days after he was paroled from the Texas Department of Corrections in May 1982, according to testimony at his trial.

Nine months later, DeLuna murdered Wanda Lopez, Schiwetz said.

"He killed this person for no reason whatsoever," said Schiwetz, who has been in private practice since 1984. "She was pleading with him, 'Don't hurt me, here's the money,' and he stabbed her."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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