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Slain men mourned: Drug war claims 1st UTEP student

By Adriana Gómez Licón \ El Paso Times
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A woman cries while another looks at a coffin at the funeral Tuesday for one of the two young men killed Sunday on the highway linking Juarez and Villa Ahumada. One of the victims, Alejandro Ruiz Salazar, 19, was identified as a student at the University of Texas at El Paso. The other victim, Jorge Pedro Gonzalez Quintero, 21, was identified as a former UTEP student. (Jesus Alcazar / Special to the Times)

» Photos: Family, friends mourn men killed
» Guestbook: Alejandro Ruiz Salazar
» Guestbook: Jorge Pedro González Quintero

EL PASO -- Alejandro Ruiz Salazar became the first UTEP student to be killed in the drug war in Mexico.

Ruiz, 19, was killed Sunday night in Juárez along with his friend Jorge Pedro González Quintero, 21, a former UTEP

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student.

University officials said they believe Ruiz is the first UTEP student killed in Juárez in the drug war. Ruiz was also a U.S. citizen who commuted from Juárez to El Paso.

"I've been apprehensive about something like this happening," said Diana Natalicio, president of the University of Texas at El Paso. "Somehow, even holding that kind of apprehension, it's always a shock to hear it. My condolences go to his family members and friends."

Today, UTEP will fly its flag at half-staff in honor of the two students killed in Juárez.

Ruiz and González

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were boy scouts, assistants to pastors and aspiring professionals -- not the typical targets in a gruesome drug war that has claimed the lives of more than 5,200 people since 2008. Mexican officials, including President Felipe Calderón, have said that most of those killed in drug cartel attacks are gang members or involved in the narco trade.

Gunmen chased down Ruiz and González, who were in a gray Jeep Cherokee, and shot at them on the highway that links Juárez and the town of Villa Ahumada. González appeared to

be the driver and Ruiz, the passenger. Both young men died at the scene of gunshot wounds.

Juárez Mayor José Reyes Ferriz and the Mexican boy scouts association president José Adolfo López Sampson both said Tuesday they were sorry about the killings of the two men.

"It pains us to lose these two young men, who were a model for Ciudad Juárez -- men who served, worked and studied," López Sampson said.

Ruiz had three brothers and one sister. Across the social networking website Facebook, friends of the Ruiz siblings have been posting their condolences since Sunday.

Four of the siblings attended or are now enrolled at UTEP. His brother, Leonel Ruiz, was too upset to comment on the murder of his brother.

"All



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I am going to tell you is he was my best friend," Leonel Ruiz said.

Family members, who held his funeral Tuesday, said they did not know the reason behind the attack. News reports said the two men were coming from a boy scout camp before they were gunned down.

"They would not mess with anybody, ever," said Denisse Ruiz, Alejandro Ruiz's sister who also attends UTEP.

Denisse Ruiz said her brother was very talkative and funny. He wore his long, curly hair afro-style.

"He was a strong and dedicated boy," she said.

On the academic side, Ruiz was an aspiring nurse. He graduated in 2009 from Silva Magnet High School, which is selectively geared to students who want to go into health fields.

Ruiz's friends said he earned good grades in his first year in college. He also worked on campus as a work-study employee in the Graduate School dean's office.

"The staff loved having him around," said Patricia Witherspoon, dean of the graduate school. "He

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was a cheerful employee. É He seemed very focused but also joyful about his work, about his major."

The drug war in Juárez had already affected González, the other man killed Sunday. He told a teacher at Burges High School, where he graduated in 2006, that his brother was killed in 2008 after the brother fought back when men tried to kidnap him.

"I remember telling him that it was up to his generation to put an end to all the violence in Juárez," said Richard Bruns, now the high-school counselor at Burges.

González and Bruns continued to exchange e-mails after he graduated. He told his former teacher that he was an honors student in metallurgical and materials engineering at UTEP.

The last time González communicated with Bruns, he told him he lived and worked in Juárez and traveled every day to El Paso to go to UTEP. University officials said he attended UTEP from fall 2006 to spring 2009. He did not graduate.

In an e-mail, González told Bruns that he was an assistant pastor in Juárez, and he wrote about being in love with his girlfriend.

The drug war has threatened higher education in both Mexico and the United States.

In late March, two graduate students from the private and elite school Tech de Monterrey were killed right outside campus. Mexican officials initially said they were hit men. It wasn't until the mother of one of them recognized the body of her son in the morgue that officials took the claims back.

In late April, UTEP suspended and prohibited any university-related travels to Mexico, citing a recall by UT System Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa.

Natalicio said last week in a memo that university-sponsored travel in Mexico would be prohibited, including day trips to Juárez.

"I think the purpose of that is to underscore that we consider Juárez, unfortunately, to be off limits," Natalicio said. "If you have family members there, it is understandable that people will continue to go. It's very, very sad that life has changed there."

Adriana Gómez Licón may be reached at agomez@elpasotimes.com; 546-6129.







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