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Homicide Suspect Found in L.A.

Cell phone records lead to fugitive and his girlfriend

By T.J. Wilham Journal Staff Writer

Investigators used cell phone records to find an Albuquerque murder suspect and his girlfriend, who were hiding out in a Los Angeles home.

Police had been looking for Joseph Espinoza, 29, and his girlfriend, Marie Gonzales, 22, since the July 13 shooting death of 23-year-old Lawrence Vargas.

Warrants were issued for the couple charging them with an open count of murder. Gonzales also was charged with accessory to murder. Espinoza was on probation at the time of the homicide.

Police investigators received information several days ago from confidential sources saying the couple was staying in a Los Angeles home. Police also were monitoring Espinoza's cell phone usage.

Deputy U.S. marshals and Albuquerque police officers then set up surveillance on a Los Angeles home they believed the cell phone calls were coming from. Deputy marshals eventually saw Espinoza and Gonzales enter the home.

Authorities raided the home about 11 a.m. Wednesday and took both into custody.

The couple remained in custody late Thursday at the Los Angeles County Jail, where they are waiting to be extradited.

According to police, Espinoza was in a black Cadillac blocking the exit to a parking garage near Third and Copper on July 13. Police say Espinoza got into a fight with one of Vargas' friends and went after them with a gun after they tried to walk away. Investigators say Gonzales was the one who handed her boyfriend a gun.

Espinoza fired one shot, striking Vargas, who police say was not an instigator in the fight. Vargas was an artist and worked as an animal handler at the city's Animal Welfare Department.

Police say Espinoza is a gang member who had been released from prison and placed on probation six weeks before the shooting. Espinoza also had been on probation or parole two other times.

Four days before Vargas was shot, Espinoza missed an appointment with his probation officer to be fitted for an ankle monitoring device.

"It is a great catch for both the APD and the U.S. Marshals Office," U.S. marshal Gordon Eden said. "Once again, we have been able to take a career criminal off the streets, and hopefully he will not be released when he returns to New Mexico."



ESPINOZA: Charged with open count of murder

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