

Lake Waco killer dies

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Cause of Gilbert Melendez's death in prison not disclosed

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Gilbert Melendez, who was serving two life prison terms after admitting that he helped David Wayne Spence and his brother, Anthony Melendez, kill three teen-agers at Lake Waco in 1982, has died in prison.

Nancy Wiser, the mother of murder victim Jill Montgomery, said she received a letter from



state prison officials Monday informing her that Melendez died Oct. 1. The letter said "the cause of death is considered confidential information."

Melendez Officials in four departments of the state prison system Tuesday declined to reveal the cause of Melendez's death, echoing what prison victims' services workers wrote in Wiser's letter.

Melendez, 43, died while an inmate at the Michael Unit near Tennessee Colony, prison officials said. He was serving two life prison terms after pleading guilty in 1984 to murder in the stabbing deaths of Montgomery and her friend, Kenneth Franks of Waco. Raylene Rice, a friend of Montgomery's from Waxahachie, also was killed July 13, 1982, in what became known nationally as the Lake Waco murders.

Spence, 39, who twice was sentenced to death for his role in the slayings, was executed April 3, 1997, after spending 13 years on death row.

Anthony Melendez, Gilbert's younger brother who also pleaded guilty to murder, is serving two life prison terms and is an inmate at the Terrell Unit near Livingston, prison officials said

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Tuesday.

Wiser followed the two-year investigation into the teens' deaths very closely and attended every hearing and trial of the defendants in the case. Because of her heart condition at the time, her doctor advised her not to witness Spence's execution. However, she was in Huntsville with her son and daughter when Spence was put to death.

"The letter was typed on the 13th, and it took six days to reach me," she said. "I thought it was going to be another letter for a parole hearing for either Gilbert or Tony, and I said, 'My gosh, it just seems like we finished protesting one.' That's the only time the prison writes to me, when a parole hearing is coming up."

The Melendez brothers first became eligible for parole in 1989 and, for a time, were considered for parole every year. Wiser and her family and friends wrote to the parole board protesting their release each time, Wiser said, adding that she also has spoken by telephone to two board members.

Parole laws have since been changed, and now some prison inmates are considered for parole every three years. Anthony

Melendez is eligible for release again in 2000, prison officials said.

"I was so pleased when I read the letter in the sense that number one, it wasn't another parole hearing notice, and number two, it is one less guy I have to worry about getting out of prison," Wiser said. "I have no good feeling toward Gilbert. It was not sad news. I don't know how to put it other than it is a relief to me that I don't have to worry about him getting paroled anymore."

Gilbert Melendez testified against Muneer Mohammad Deeb at Deeb's capital murder trial in Cleburne in 1985. His chilling testimony about the horrific deaths suffered by the three teens helped put Deeb on death row for

six years, before his conviction was overturned by the Court of Criminal Appeals.

Deeb, a Jordanian, was charged with initiating the murder-for-hire scheme by offering to split a \$20,000 life insurance policy with Spence in exchange for the death of one of Deeb's employees on whom he had purchased a life insurance policy. Former District Attorney Vic Feazell, who prosecuted Spence, Deeb and the Melendez brothers, maintained that Spence mistook Montgomery for Deeb's employee and killed her and her friends by mistake.

Deeb was acquitted on retrial in Fort Worth in 1993 and now reportedly owns several taxicabs in Dallas. Gilbert Melendez

refused to testify against Deeb at his second trial and talked his brother out of testifying also, officials have said. Both brothers testified against Spence at his second trial in Bryan in 1985.

"I totally blame Gilbert for Deeb getting off in Fort Worth because he refused to testify," Wiser said. "I think if the jury had heard his eyewitness testimony as they did in Cleburne, Deeb wouldn't be walking the streets right now. Gilbert had a chance to try to redeem himself, and he chose not to do that, and I had really, really hard feelings about Gilbert. Not only was he a participant in the actual killings, but after his confession to make himself not get the death penalty,

he refused to give that testimony in Fort Worth, and the jury just didn't have enough to convict Deeb without it."

Richard Franks of Waco, the father of Kenneth Franks, declined comment Tuesday about

Melendez's death.

Feazell said he was relieved that Gilbert Melendez was not released from prison on parole. "I'm sorry when anybody dies, but at least he didn't get out," said Feazell, who lives in Austin.