

Former Austin Police Officer Robert Martinez, one of the most decorated peace officers on the force, died of cancer Tuesday.

Martinez, a longtime beat cop in East Austin, was known for coaxing information from reluctant witnesses and suspects in the minority community because he knew them, their families and where they'd grown up.

He also helped solve 18 homicide cases, including the notorious case of Robert Zani, accused of murdering real estate agents and others in the 1970s.

Martinez's son, also a police officer, died in a wreck on duty in 1989.

Read more about Martinez in tomorrow's Austin American-Statesman.  
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Robert Martinez Sr. didn't rely on police procedure alone.

Martinez listened to his instinct and used body language as his guide during his 30-year career with the Austin Police Department.

"He was like a surgeon," Assistant Police Chief Rudy Landeros said. "He would surgically cut through a person's story until he got down to the facts. It was a work of art the way he would interview these people. He didn't miss a detail. A lot of times, he would catch a discrepancy that a rookie officer would miss, and a lot of times, that detail would give us a confession."

Martinez, considered the most decorated officer in the Austin Police Department's history and one of the most decorated peace officers in Texas, died of cancer Tuesday at his home in Manor. He was 62.

"I think any police officer would tell you that there's something special about Robert," said state Rep. Terry Keel, R-Austin, a former Travis County assistant district attorney.

"He became a legendary lawman, and there's very few people in law enforcement that you can say that about as a literal fact."

'The Legend'

Martinez, who was widely known as "the Legend," gave up an \$800-a-month job as an assistant supervisor at a grocery store to work at the Austin Police Department in 1967, where he earned \$390 a month. His wife, Mary Ann Martinez, went back to work as a teacher to help the family make ends meet.

He had a walking beat in East Austin for a year and worked on the Austin area organized crime unit, on the Hispanic Crimes Unit, at the Montopolis neighborhood center and in gang prevention.

He earned at least 20 medals, including two lifesaving medals, a presidential citation and more than 550 personal commendation letters from residents.

He was also featured on the nationally syndicated show "Top Cops" with then-partner Mark Gil and was featured in a book published by the Police Executive Research Forum, "Tribute: A Day on the Beat with America's Finest." The book credits Martinez with working with Interpol and Mexican authorities -- who were viewed as usually uncooperative -- to extradite 15 people suspected in Texas deaths.

Martinez's most high-profile case involved Robert Joseph Zani, who was convicted and sentenced to 99 years in prison for the 1967 murder of George Vizard. Martinez and partner Paul Ruiz worked on the case for a year.

"He was not a product of technology," said Gil, who is now retired. "He didn't have a Ph. D. or a master's degree or a bachelor's degree, but he had an abundance of street smarts and common sense. He worked circles around those who depend on technology and higher education."

Martinez realized early on that he could best do his job as a patrol officer in East Austin. "He showed to myself and a lot of other officers that you work where you belong," said Austin officer Todd Myers, who met Martinez in 1984.

Martinez, born and raised in East Austin, walked from house to house and from business to business, getting to know the people he helped as much as the people he helped put in prison.

His lists of contacts was so complete that he often could talk to suspects about going fishing with their fathers or about the births of their siblings, Myers said. Often, people would come to him after a crime was committed and lead him to the suspects.

His approach worked as well with criminals as it did with victims, many of whom shunned police because of their status as illegal immigrants. Some victims would bake him cakes or invite him over for dinner. Martinez would sometimes give them the money in his pockets.

"He loved weak people, people who couldn't defend themselves," Myers said. "He always felt like he was put on Earth by God to defend them. He would go after the robbers with a passion, and that made it hard on the robbers."

#### Highs and lows

Martinez courted controversy after then-Austin Police Chief Elizabeth Watson transferred him out of the gang unit in 1994, citing department policy. Martinez, who said the move was racially discriminatory, successfully sued the City of Austin, his brother, Nash Martinez, said.

Martinez was criticized two years later after he appeared in a political advertisement for Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle. At the time, a Police Department spokeswoman said it was against policy to participate in any political activity while in uniform.

Martinez's proudest moment was the day his son, Robert Martinez Jr., was sworn in as an Austin police officer. The younger Martinez, known as Robbie, had fulfilled his childhood dream of following in his father's footsteps. Robbie worked in East Austin and would often stop by his father's office to talk about police work or just to chat.

"I've never seen a man so happy," said Anthony Johnson, an Austin police officer.

That bond was broken in 1989, when his son was killed. Robbie, who was on duty, was driving to help another officer on a domestic violence call when another driver ran a red light.

Robbie swerved to avoid the car and slammed into a tree. He was 26. Until then, Robert and Robbie Martinez had been the only Hispanic father and son working as Austin police officers.

Saying goodbye

As he lay dying, the elder Martinez's thoughts turned to his family. Nash Martinez, whose son also died in a car accident, remembers a conversation he had with his brother.

"He said, 'I'm not afraid of death. I'm a good Christian,' " Nash Martinez recalled. " `I've lived a good life. I'm anxious to see my son and Mom and Daddy and your son. I know when I die, I'm going to heaven because I've lived a good life.' "

Martinez, who refused to see some people as his illness progressed because he wanted to be remembered in good health, said his goodbyes before he died. Many visitors stopped by to reminisce. Former partner Gil was one of those visitors.

"I think it eased our lives for the moment and allowed us to recapture the warmth and excitement that were a big part of our time working together while at the same time, carrying him away, if by imagery alone, from his discomfort and sickness," Gil said. "I think his legacy will always be that if you were on the wrong side of the law and he was on your trail, your days were numbered. And if you were a kid with no place to go, he was your shoes, your jacket, your place for the night and a constant suggestion to not give up and try harder."

Family-Placed Obituary

Senior Police Officer Senior Police Officer, Robert M. Martinez Sr., passed away Tuesday, November 18, 2003. He was born in Austin, Texas on December 27, 1941. Robert served the Austin Police Department with distinction in Tactical Operations, Special Crimes, Vice Squad Detail, Organized Crime, Under Cover Narcotics Agent,

Homicide Task Force, Community Service in Gang and Crime Prevention, and Walking Beat. He was preceded in death by his son, Police Officer Robert Martinez, Jr. (Robby T. Martinez Jr.); mother, Cleotilde Sifuentes Martinez; father Tomas Martinez; daughter-in-law, Adela Martinez; father-in-law, Ernest A. Townes; mother-in-law, Mary Z. Townes; and brother, Tommy Martinez. He is survived by his wife of 42 years, Mary Ann Martinez; daughter, Roxanne Rodriguez; son-in-law, Daniel Rodriguez; grandchildren, Martina Madison Rodriguez and Robert Martin Rodriguez; brothers, Jessie Martinez and wife, Diana, Sam Martinez, Nash Martinez, Michael Martinez, Ben M. Sifuentes and wife, Delia, Frank Sifuentes and wife, Sara; sisters, Petra Lujan, Lupe Rosales and husband, Tomas, Carmen Shepard and husband, Charles, Janie Cardenaz and husband, Augustin and Mary Esther Ruiz and husband, George; brother-in-law, Robert Townes and wife, Stella; sister-in-law, Elaine Garrett and husband, Jack and numerous nieces and nephews. Funeral Mass will be celebrated at 10:00 a.m., Friday, November 21, 2003, at San Jose Catholic Church, 2435 Oak Crest Avenue with Reverend Tom Franks, Celebrant. Rite of Committal will follow at Austin Memorial Park Cemetery. Honoring Mr. Martinez as pallbearers will be Paul Ruiz, Mel Villanueva, Herbert Martinez, Ed Dornbusch, Frank Castillo, and Heriberto Hernandez. Honorary pallbearers will be the members of the Austin Police Department's Honor Guard. The family would like to extend a very special thanks to the staff at Hospice Austin, especially to Tania Watkins for her loving care.