

## MEMBER THINKS OF GANG AS A FAMILY LEADER PLEADS GUILTY TO BASHING A RIVAL

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The reputed leader of a suddenly notorious Detroit street gang pleaded guilty to assault Friday, but was overshadowed by a young woman who emerged as the gang's voice and said it was getting a bad rap.

"I'm all for the police. I know it's their job" Dawn Marie Mendoza told reporters who were at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice for the assault case. "But they said they arrested 300 gang members and I don't think that half of them really belong to any gang. They just say they do."

Mendoza, 20, clad in the red and black colors of the **Latin Counts**, was a focus of attention in court and on television news broadcasts Friday, as well as at Thursday's southwest Detroit community-police meeting about gang concerns.

She came to court Friday in a show of support for Anthony Viramontez, 20, the reputed leader of the **Latin Counts** gang, who pleaded guilty to hitting a rival with a brick. His sentencing is April 12.

Controversy has swirled around the gang in recent weeks as police crack down in response to an outcry from southwest Detroit residents about shootings, knifings, robberies and drug dealing by more than 30 gangs.

Mendoza, who claims to be the only female member of the **Latin Counts**, the largest of the gangs, has put herself in the center of the storm with the message that her gang is more like a family that is being unfairly blamed for "the other little gangs."

"Tony is a peacemaker," Mendoza said Friday, clutching a tiny Bible. "He always told us to stay off drugs and stay in school. When Tony got locked up, everything just went on the wild."

In recent months, police have blamed several shootings on rivalries between the local **Latin Counts** and just about every other gang on the southwest side, especially the Cobras. The **Counts** and Cobras are both headquartered in Chicago.

Mendoza has been implicated, but subsequently cleared, in violence. She was charged with second-degree murder in the Dec. 5 stabbing of Flora McMillian, 23, at a Waldo Street party.

Recorder's Court Judge Clarice Jobes dismissed the charges March 11 at the request of the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office for lack of evidence.

At Mendoza's preliminary examination, a 19-year-old woman testified she saw Mendoza beat up two other women. She said she saw McMillian, a mother of two, keel over with stab wounds in the back with Mendoza the only person near her.

Police said a rival gang member told them he saw Mendoza stab the woman but he recanted in court, saying police -- who were questioning him in the fatal shooting of a **Latin Count** -- beat him to sign a paper they wouldn't let him read.

Mendoza said Friday that she did not stab McMillian, although she admits beating up the other two women.

The emergence of Mendoza as a television spokeswoman has angered McMillian's mother, Tomasita Castillo.

"I seen her on television this morning and it upset me so much, defending the **Latin Counts** ," said Castillo.

"She's something big now because she did that to my daughter. If they don't stop her, I think she's going to do something else because she's not scared."

On Friday, Mendoza wore a red and black medallion that said "Love Bootis-Bey" in honor of the slain Octavio (Bootis) Viramontez, 16, brother of the **Latin Counts** leader.

She said the unsolved Dec. 23 drive-by slaying at a gas station on Vernor would go unavenged because the **Latin Counts** "are not into revenge. As far as I'm concerned God will take care of whoever killed Bootis."

Detroit Police Chief Stanley Knox has acknowledged a crackdown on southwest side gangs and told the community meeting Thursday that police have arrested more than 700 youths since Feb. 26.

Viramontez's attorney, Charles Murphy, scoffed at reports that Viramontez and more than 300 **Latin Counts** are terrorizing the city.

"Tony's in jail; Tony's brother is dead. There are no more **Latin Counts** ," Murphy said. "The more publicity there is, the more kids are going to be calling themselves the **Latin Counts** . They might as well say they were Pancho Villas."

Caption: Photo

: Dawn Marie Mendoza came to court Friday in a show of support for Anthony Viramontez, the reputed leader of the **LatinCounts** gang. "Tony is a peacemaker," Mendoza said. "He always told us to stay off drugs and stay in school. When Tony got locked up, everything just went on the wild."

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