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Victim Describes Jail Assault

By Anna Gorman

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Shane Wilson is tough and tattooed, a former Nazi Low Rider gang member with a long criminal record.

"I'm a big guy, I'm a bad guy," Wilson said in a jailhouse interview Thursday.

But when he agreed to testify against a suspected murderer in exchange for a lighter sentence, Wilson said, "I was scared for my life."

Witnesses are targets, he said, especially in jail: "In my world, if you testify, you put your life in jeopardy – bottom line."

Less than 24 hours after testifying, Wilson sat in his cell at Men's Central Jail in downtown Los Angeles waiting for dinner. He was alone, protected by a court order requiring special precautions for his safety.

About 4 p.m., an inmate walked toward Wilson's cell with a tray holding a plate of hot dogs and beans. The inmate fumbled the tray and as Wilson reached through the bars to save his dinner, the man dug into his pocket for a weapon made of plastic and razorblades. In a moment, the blade opened a 5-inch cut across Wilson's face that required more than 200 stitches to close.

The March 27 attack came despite repeated pleas from prosecutors that jailers protect Wilson. A judge had ordered the Sheriff's Department to keep Wilson in protective custody, according to the Los Angeles County district attorney's office.

The slashing is one in a series of assaults at Men's Central Jail that has prompted investigations by the Sheriff's Department, as well as calls by the Board of Supervisors for probes into management of the county's 18,000-inmate system.

Five County Jail inmates have been killed since October, including another witness who was allegedly strangled last month by the suspected murderer he had testified against. That victim also had a court order for special protection.

"Nobody can vouch or guarantee anybody's safety over there," said Wilson's attorney, Carey Caruso. "It's unbelievable."

After Wilson was attacked, he said, he dropped to the floor and pressed a towel against his face to try to stop the bleeding. He recalled screaming for help, "Man down!" several times.

Wilson saw the deputy at the end of his cellblock on the telephone. Other inmates yelled, Wilson said, trying to drown out his pleas for help. He remembered hearing one inmate saying, "Ha, ha. The joke's on you."

Wilson was convinced that he would bleed to death. Help, he said, finally came 15 minutes later.

"He was going for my throat," said the 35-year-old San Fernando Valley man. "I could have been dead."

The suspect in Wilson's attack, Porfirio Avila, is a gang member convicted of two murders, including the killing of a witness, said prosecutors. Law enforcement sources said they believe that Avila, who had been sentenced to life in state prison without the possibility of parole earlier that month, was doing a favor for the Mexican Mafia gang.

Sheriff's officials said they know of no connection between Wilson and his attacker or of any motive.

Wilson knew that he was taking a risk when he agreed in March to cooperate with authorities. But, he said, he didn't have much choice.

Wilson was facing a possible sentence of 29 years to life as an accessory after the fact in the 2003 murder of Christopher Walsh, whose body was found in a Van Nuys storage shed. David Steinberg and another man were charged with murdering Walsh.

Wilson had met Steinberg a few weeks earlier and said he knew about the killing but had not gone to the police. Prosecutors were planning to try him for having an unspecified role in the homicide until he agreed to testify against Steinberg.

"I was put in a position where I had to testify," Wilson said. "Otherwise, they were going to convict me."

Wilson said he saw a deal with prosecutors as a chance to avoid spending the rest of his life behind bars. He said he had left the Nazi Low Riders, the gang he joined while a teenager serving time in the California Youth Authority. Maybe now, he said, he could take his 7-year-old son to another state and start over.

On March 22, he pleaded guilty to being an accessory after the fact and agreed to testify against Steinberg. In exchange, he would receive, at most, a three-year sentence.

Prosecutors said they started working with the Sheriff's Department to ensure that Wilson would be protected, a district attorney's spokeswoman said. His sentencing is scheduled for June.

"We did everything appropriate and beyond the call of duty," said Deputy Dist. Atty. Stephanie Sparagna. "It was very upsetting when he got hurt."

Deputy Dist. Atty. Michael Kraut spoke several times with jail officials to arrange for Wilson's protection, according to a district attorney's spokeswoman. Until he testified at a preliminary hearing on March 26, Wilson was kept in the same part of the jail as his co-defendants. Before he was moved, Wilson said, he could hear Steinberg and other inmates talking through a vent to other inmates.

Wilson wrote a letter to his attorney complaining that he didn't feel safe, he said. He said he believes that an inmate intercepted the letter and told others that Wilson planned to testify against Steinberg.

The day Wilson testified, Kraut called the jail to make sure that Wilson had arrived safely from the courthouse and to remind sheriff's deputies of the danger he faced.

Sheriff's officials moved Wilson to a single cell in a protected area, where, the next day, he was attacked.

"It's just amazing to me," said Ben Broudy, an attorney who plans to take over Wilson's case. "I don't see how

anything happens in the jail without the knowledge or consent of the guards.”

Sheriff's Capt. Ray Leyva said inmates in the area where Wilson was being held are allowed out of their cells one at a time, to take showers, for example, or perform duties such as food delivery and trash pickup.

But Caruso said he believed inmates on that row were supposed to be let out of their cells only under supervision. The inmate suspected in the attack was delivering the food alone.

“He had just testified and was supposed to be a keep-away from everybody,” he said. “I had no idea other inmates were going to be feeding him

Wilson since has been moved to another jail facility.

As he ran his hand over the crescent-shaped scar running from his left ear to below his chin, Wilson said he was thankful to be alive.

Rather than direct his anger toward his attacker, Wilson said, “I'm more mad at the deputies who didn't take care of me. They put me in a lion's den, basically. It's ridiculous. They don't really do their job there.”

Wilson said he still fears for his life, but must testify at Steinberg's trial, set for summer.

“If I don't, then he could go free,” he said, “and I could end up dead.”

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