

Suspect is arrested in fatal cafe shooting

by Alex Roth and Dan Laidman

Hollywood - In the end, it was his odd-looking truck that gave away Ralph Stephen Garbarini, the suspect in a killing so random that it became the talk of San Diego.

Garbarini, suspected of gunning down a popular businessman for no apparent reason at a dessert cafe in the Hillcrest neighborhood, was arrested in Hollywood Tuesday after security guards saw his pickup parked on Hawthorn Avenue, authorities said.

SUSPECT - Ralph Stephen Garbarini, who is suspected of fatally shooting Michael Fineman at Extraordinary Desserts in December, was transported into San Diego police headquarters yesterday. Photo by Nelvin Cepeda.

The 45-year-old homeless construction worker, who had eluded police for 10 weeks, quietly surrendered several blocks from Hollywood's renowned Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Authorities captured him as he approached the pickup. They had been watching the truck for about three hours.

Investigators "approached him, asked him his name. He readily admitted who he was, and he was taken into custody," Supervising Deputy U.S. Marshal Greg Doss said at a news conference.

Two retired law enforcement officers working as security guards in the neighborhood first checked on the Toyota truck - with its wooden camper shell and rock-formation paint job - after a woman brought it to their attention. On Saturday, the woman, who lives in the neighborhood, had seen a segment about Garbarini on the TV show "America's Most Wanted."

"She ... thought this looked like the same vehicle as was on the show," said Mike Harkins, the security guards' supervisor.

The guards checked the truck's license plate and realized it matched the plate number identified as Garbarini's on the "America's Most Wanted" Web site, Harkins said. They immediately notified Los Angeles police, who placed the truck under surveillance, authorities said.

Garbarini was arrested about 4 p.m., about 20 minutes after a team of investigators from San Diego arrived, Doss said. Nearly 30 officers had been staking out the truck and surrounding area, said Wendi Berndt, the supervising homicide detective for the Hollywood station.

Whether police were able to question Garbarini about the shooting was unknown late Tuesday. Doss said authorities are still trying to figure out a motive, adding that Garbarini, who has lived and worked in California, Arizona and Mexico, has no criminal record.

The arrest brought relief to the family of slain businessman Michael Fineman of San Diego, and to local law enforcement officials, who have spent weeks sifting through hundreds of tips about Garbarini's whereabouts.

In the months since Fineman was shot Dec. 30 while eating with his wife and friends at Extraordinary Desserts, investigators have followed leads from all over California and Arizona, among other places.

"We can't help but be elated," said Mark Owen, the U.S. Marshals' acting chief deputy in San Diego.

Fineman's wife, Thuy, 33, sobbed during a news conference in the driveway of her home last night. Her husband was killed just six weeks after she finished treatment for cervical cancer.

"I just hope that justice will be served," she said, adding: "It's been very difficult, so difficult. I miss Michael a lot."

She learned of the arrest when San Diego police Lt. Kevin Rooney called her as she and a friend, Kimberley King, were shopping for a mattress.

She jumped off a mattress and ran through the store, saying, "They caught him!" King said.

A man who answered the door at the Clairemont home of Anthony Koveleski - a friend of Fineman's who also was shot at the restaurant - said: "It's about time. It's been 10 weeks. At least he can't hurt anyone else."

The death of Fineman, a 44-year-old father of three who owned a home-redesign business, was all the more horrifying because the shooting was so utterly random. He was shot in the head execution-style while enjoying dessert with his wife and friends at the popular cafe five days after Christmas.

Garbarini had also been in the cafe that night. For some reason, police said, he began staring at Fineman's table, even though he didn't know Fineman, his wife or friends. Fineman eventually told the staff that Garbarini was making them uncomfortable, and an employee escorted Garbarini out of the restaurant.

In an incident captured on the restaurant's security video, Garbarini returned a few minutes later, headed directly for Fineman's table, shot him, then calmly walked out and vanished into the night, police said.

Until Tuesday, police had been unable to find him. Some sightings had been more credible than others.

At one point, authorities received a "very credible" tip that Garbarini was in the southern Arizona town of Rio Rico looking for work, Doss said. Agents with a San Diego-based fugitive task force spent three days "going from transient park to transient park, RV parks, questioning people," but still couldn't find him, Doss said.

Charles Zank, who lives in an apartment near where Garbarini was arrested, said he ran into him on the street about two months ago as Garbarini spray-painted his truck from gray to white.

"It was unusual. It looked like an A-frame house," Zank said of the pickup and its homemade plywood shell.

Garbarini introduced himself only as "Dave" and said he was looking for carpentry work, Zank said.

Throughout the 10-week search, Garbarini's family, many of whom live in Northern California, had been cooperating with authorities, Doss said. They told authorities that Garbarini has no history of violence, Doss said. Police haven't commented on whether Garbarini has a history of mental illness.

"The family doesn't wish to comment," one of Garbarini's relatives said when reached by telephone in the Northern California town of Jackson, Garbarini's hometown.

One of Fineman's friends, David Pulvers, said he had been baffled as to why it took so long to track down Garbarini.

Pulvers said he had hoped that Garbarini had "done society a favor and taken himself out in the mountains."

"Thank goodness he didn't hurt anyone else, at least that we know of," Pulvers said.

Karen Krasne, owner of Extraordinary Desserts, said she was "extremely thrilled that he's in custody."

Krasne said she was convinced the shooting was a one-time tragedy and that Garbarini was not going to return. But she could not say her employees - some of whom saw the shooting - felt the same way.

Tuesday's arrest can end the anxiety, she said.

Staff writers Michael Stetz, Terry Rodgers and David E. Graham contributed to this report.

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