

Honoring Larry Casuse

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
Friday, 24 March 2023 04:25



Part 1: FIGHTING FOR INDIGENOUS SAFETY, HEALTH

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PART OF 1 OF 3

Larry Casuse spent the last moments of his life fighting for what he believed in: protecting Indigenous people from the alcohol industry and the way it took advantage of them. He specifically wanted a bar, the Navajo Inn, outside of Gallup on Highway 264, on the border of the Navajo Nation, to change its ways.

After going through the normal channels — he filed petitions; went to court to try and shut the bar down; sent appeals to the state liquor board; and had spoken to the mayor and city council multiple times — he decided to tackle issues he had with the city in a more drastic manner.

His fight ended March 1, 1973, when he was reportedly shot and killed by Gallup Police after he kidnapped and held the mayor at the time, Emmett Garcia, hostage. He was 19 years old.

EVENTS PRECEDING THE KILLING

David Correia, a professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, explained the timeline of Casuse's final days. He said that Casuse believed talking to Garcia would help fix the problem with the Navajo Inn. Correia explained that as mayor, Garcia promoted strict alcohol laws, but he was also an owner of the bar.

Along with being the mayor of Gallup and an owner of the Navajo Inn, Garcia had also recently taken over the Gallup Indian Center. The center contained offices for several programs that provided benefits to Native Americans. It was also a place they could take a shower, and it was one of the few places they could get a drink of water without having to buy anything.

Correia noted that the mayor had fired some revered leaders of the organization, which upset some UNM students and led to protests.

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Correia and Casuse's sister Ursula Casuse Carrillo said that Casuse thought Garcia was "hypocritical." Garcia's actions and his inability to do anything about the Navajo Inn left Casuse frustrated.

Further, Casuse stewed over Garcia's recent nomination to the University of New Mexico Board of Regents, which is responsible for the general supervision of all educational activities within the university system.

Casuse, a UNM student, and an acquaintance, Robert Nakaidinae, were in Albuquerque Feb. 28, 1973, attending a conference that brought Native leaders together.

Casuse's frustrations boiled over the night of the conference, and Casuse and Nakaidinae formulated a plan to kidnap the Gallup mayor.

THE DAY OF THE KILLING

The men woke up March 1 and walked to the Albuquerque UNM campus. That's where they found Delbert Rudy, a junior pre-med student. They threatened him with a pistol and knife, handcuffed him, and placed him in the backseat of his own vehicle, which they then drove to Gallup.

Correia described Rudy as a "very" conservative Republican. He had the chance to interview Rudy in 2013 for his book *An Enemy Such as This: Larry Casuse and the Struggle for Native Liberation in One Family on Two Continents across Three Centuries* briefly before he died.

Correia said that Rudy thought he was going to be killed, so he struck up a conversation with the two men to try and find out what they planned on doing with him. Casuse allegedly told him

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all that he had done to try and get the bar shut down.

“[He told me] he didn’t really care about what all these activists on campus were saying about civil rights issues,” Correia said of the interview. “But in the course of that two-hour drive [to Gallup], he became convinced that what Larry was doing was the right thing.”

Casuse reportedly explained to Rudy that his plan was to kidnap the mayor and not let him go until he agreed to shut down the Navajo Inn or at least move it back from the road.

After arriving at the mayor’s office in Gallup, Casuse and Nakaidinae let Rudy go. They then went on to kidnap Garcia at gunpoint. Unfortunately for them, a police officer saw them almost immediately.

Police followed them to their final destination, Stearns Sporting Goods store, which was located on Historic Highway 66 just west of Coal Avenue. The two men barricaded themselves inside the store.

Garcia was able to escape at one point, pushing Nakaidinae away from him, turning, and allegedly throwing himself through a plate glass window.

Once they knew the mayor was safe, police reportedly began shooting.

“Eyewitnesses report just a barrage of gunfire from police, including tear gas,” Correia said.

Correia said that neither Casuse nor Nakaidinae fired at the police at any point during the standoff.

In an interview after the incident, Nakaidinae explained that he knew Casuse needed medical

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attention after being shot twice. So, Nakaidinae walked out of the store to try and find medical attention for Casuse.

When he was leaving the store, Nakaidinae threw a rifle and shotgun out the window, leaving Casuse with only a .32 caliber handgun.

Police officers grabbed Nakaidinae once he exited. Three other officers, including the police chief and an officer armed with a shotgun, went into the store to meet Casuse.

Moments later, they pulled the fallen activist's body out of the store.

Correia said that the coroner later said Casuse died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, but Nakaidinae stated in an interview that his gunshot wound did not match the caliber of his .32.

DEATH CAUSES CONTROVERSY

Neither Carrillo nor Correia believe Casuse shot himself.

"Gallup, the people, they never liked Larry," Carrillo said. "They tried to cover up the story. They tried to say he killed himself when he didn't. He didn't let Gallup look as good as they wanted to look."

Nakaidinae was sentenced to jail for his involvement with the kidnapping and served over a year. He was released in the summer of '74.

Casuse was buried March 5, four days after he died.

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Organizations around Gallup, including GallupARTS and the Octavia Fellin Public Library, are holding events to celebrate Casuse's life for the whole month of March 50 years later. As the month winds down, there are still a few events left on the schedule.

A community conversation about alcohol policy is slated for March 19 by the Gallup Alcohol Policy Working Group. The purpose of this gathering is to explore and discuss evidence-based policy solutions to reduce alcohol-related deaths and accidents in Gallup and McKinley County. Participants will learn more about and work together to strategize potential policy solutions.

The second part of a "Community Conversation with Indigenous Lifeways" will focus on healing. It's scheduled for March 25. The first part, which was held March 4, focused on the topic of "truth."

The two-part community dialogue uses art as a starting point to create a safe space for people to speak together about issues of economic exploitation that impacts the community as a whole.

To learn more about the events taking place in honor of Casuse, visit galluparts.org/50years.

Tune in next week for Part Two of the Sun's coverage of the Larry Casuse story and the events going on around Gallup to remember him.

By Molly Ann Howell
Sun Correspondent