



October 23, 2026

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For Immediate Release: Michael Nevarez Pleads Guilty and is Sentenced for 1997 Murder That Led to Wrongful Conviction of Martin Santillan

(DALLAS) – Michael Nevarez, 45, has pleaded guilty to murder in the 1997 fatal shooting of 21-year-old Damond Wittman outside a Deep Ellum nightclub, a case that resulted in an innocent man spending more than 25 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

Nevarez, who was 16 at the time of the shooting, pleaded guilty to murder this week. A jury then sentenced him to 21 years in prison.

On July 14, 1997, Wittman was standing in a parking lot outside a Deep Ellum nightclub with friends when a male approached and asked for a cigarette. After Wittman gave him one, the male pulled out a gun and demanded money. Wittman attempted to fight off the gunman but was shot multiple times. He later died at Baylor University Medical Center.

In 1998, 24-year-old Martin Santillan was convicted of capital murder and sentenced to life in prison for Wittman's killing. Santillan maintained his innocence, but his conviction stood for more than 25 years.

In 2021, the Dallas County District Attorney's Office Conviction Integrity Unit (CIU) under the leadership of DA John Creuzot, renewed its investigation into Santillan's case and submitted evidence for additional DNA testing using newer technology. The testing identified DNA profiles belonging to unknown individuals on a Dallas Stars jersey recovered near the crime scene. Subsequent investigation, conducted in partnership with the Dallas Police Department and with assistance from the Colorado Springs Police Department, led investigators to Nevarez.

In March 2023, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals recognized Santillan's actual innocence, and the Dallas County District Attorney's Office moved to dismiss the case against him. Santillan was exonerated after spending more than 25 years in prison.

"Today's outcome is an important step toward accountability for Damond Wittman's murder and for his family, who have waited decades for justice," said Dallas County Criminal District Attorney John Creuzot. "It is also a reminder of the profound consequences of a wrongful conviction. Martin Santillan lost more than 25 years of his life for a crime he did not commit. Our responsibility is to pursue the truth, correct past injustices and hold the person responsible accountable."

The Dallas County District Attorney's Office recognizes the work of trial attorneys Marissa Hatchett, Katherine Lessing and Lauren Livingston; investigators Anthony Winn and John Valdez; the Conviction Integrity Unit (Chief Cynthia Garza, ADA Holly Dozier, and Inv. Douglas Garrison); and victim advocate Mackenzie Kile for their work on this case.