

Voices of Texas: Juan and Martha Cotera

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- Juan Cotera, Austin, Texas

Juan remembers the phone call like it was yesterday.

"I got a call the morning after (our son) was carjacked and killed," Juan Javier's father said. "We were called by the young woman who was with him the night before. She was wondering if Juan got home because 'something' had happened. So I came downstairs, and he wasn't in his room, his truck wasn't here."

It was then that Juan Javier's parents started making calls, searching for their 25-year-old son.

"He was going across town and stopped to visit a friend when he was carjacked in downtown Austin, about two blocks from the police station," said his mother, Martha Cotera. The gunmen also carjacked a second young man, Brandon Shaw, and held them at gunpoint.

"The carjackers committed the crime because they wanted to rob them. So they took them to as many ATM machines before midnight that they could and made them take money out," she said. "They put them both into the trunk of the car and drove them into Town Lake and left them there to drown."

It took the police a couple of days to determine what happened to Juan Javier and Brandon.

Juan Javier left his house at 10:30 p.m. on a Monday night. He went to play cards with his cousin's roommate but never returned.

"Wednesday, at noon, the mayor, the police chief, and the fire chief came in person to tell us about finding Juan Javier and Brandon in the lake," Martha said. Their son, a well-known young leader, had worked on the Austin mayor's campaign.

"When Juan Javier was born, the first time I saw him, he was my 'miracle.' Just incredible. We were very close. We used to have long conversations about everything in life," his father, Juan Cotera, said.

Martha said she learned a lot from her son. "My favorite times were discussing race with him. He had an influence on me. We probably learned more important lessons from him than he did from us. I feel he was wise beyond his years," she said.

"I was definitely against the death penalty long before my son's death - I say my whole life - because I saw it as savage and uncivilized. It has no place in the kind of society we wanted for our children."

"The death penalty is no different than what happened to my son. We are the state - the people - and we kill. We make it official because we have the power to say it is official and therefore we carry no guilt over it," he said.

"We have no more right to kill than the two young men that killed my son. That is how I feel about the death penalty. I will never change. My son was against the death penalty. We all are." Martha agrees.

"I was raised a Christian and it's just wrong to step in the role of a higher being and make the decision to kill someone. Whether we kill someone willingly one on one or if the state kills, it is still wrong. It's not up to the person, it's not up to the state if person lives or dies. I believe in a higher being. I believe that life is precious. It's not for us to determine who lives and dies," she said.

Martha has been the owner of Information Systems Development for 37 years. Juan is owner of Cotera+Reed Architects, founded in 1975. Both are lifelong opponents of the death penalty.

This profile was originally developed by Chris Castillo for the Winter 2012-2013 Seizing the Momentum newsletter.

