

NEWS RELEASE

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LAREDO, TEX., ATTORNEY NAMED 'TRIAL LAWYER OF THE YEAR' AT PUBLIC JUSTICE FOUNDATION EVENT

Ronald Rodriguez, the Laredo, Tex., attorney who took on one of the country's largest private prison companies in the beating death of a man who was about to be released from a Texas prison has been named the 2010 Public Justice Trial Lawyer of the Year.

Rodriguez's award was announced Tuesday night in Vancouver, B.C., site of the Public Justice Foundation's annual Gala and Awards Dinner. He was one of five finalists for the award, which is bestowed annually to the lawyer or legal team that won verdicts, judgments or settlements in socially significant, often cutting edge cases.

Rodriguez brought the case against Wackenhut Correction Corp, which has since been renamed the Geo Group, for malicious wrongful death and destruction of evidence in the 2001 beating death of Gregorio de la Rosa of Laredo, who was serving a six-month DUI sentence in Raymondville, Tex.

Just four days away from his scheduled release, De la Rosa, an honorably discharged National Guardsman, was attacked in the prison yard in by fellow inmates wielding socks filled with metal padlocks. The lawsuit charged that prison guards and wardens stood idly by and laughed during the 20-minute beating.

De la Rosa's family learned that such beatings were not unusual at the privately run correctional facility, but rather, a tradition of payback where prisoners were beaten just before their release. Rodriguez's sleuthing revealed that Wackenhut blatantly destroyed evidence in an effort to cover up the fatal beating and that the De la Rosa beating was typical of Wackenhut's brazen corporate indifference to human life.

In 2006, a jury awarded \$47.5 million in punitive and compensatory damages against the private prison company and one of its wardens – the largest verdict in Willacy County, Tex., history and one of the largest in the country. Punitive damages against Wackenhut accounted for \$20 million of the award.

In 2009, the Texas Court of Appeals upheld the verdict, leading to a confidential settlement for the De la Rosa family.

The other finalists for the award were:

- A team of 16 attorneys who successfully challenged conditions in California's woefully overcrowded prisons, resulting in the Schwarzenegger Administration's plan to drastically improve prison conditions and accommodations.

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- Twenty lawyers from a variety of law schools, public interest organizations and private law firms who achieved a settlement with Royal Dutch Shell Corp., for its duplicity in the deaths or torture of Nigerian residents and activists who peacefully protested the oil industry's environmental and human rights abuses in the oil-rich Niger delta region of Africa's most populous country.
- A team of six lawyers who won a significant jury award for the residents of a rural Missouri community, bedeviled for years by the stench and pollution emanating from a neighboring pork processing facility operated by ContiGroup.
- The 12 attorneys who won a \$104.7 million jury verdict for the City of New York in its lawsuit against Exxon, the only one of 22 oil companies that went to trial rather than settle with the city for leaking methyl tertiary butyl ether – a dangerous and possibly cancer-causing chemical – into the Queens, N.Y., drinking water supply.

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Public Justice is America's public interest law firm, supported by – and calling on -- a nationwide network of more than 3,000 of the nation's top lawyers to pursue precedent-setting and socially significant litigation. It has a wide-ranging litigation docket in the areas of consumer rights, worker safety, civil rights and liberties, toxic torts, environmental protection, and access to the courts. Public Justice is the principal project of the Public Justice Foundation, a not-for-profit membership organization headquartered in Washington, DC, with a West Coast office in Oakland, California. The Public Justice web site address is www.publicjustice.net.