

FINALIST
PUBLIC JUSTICE 2010 TRIAL LAWYER OF THE YEAR AWARD

De la Rosa v. Wackenhut Correction Corp.

Laredo, Tex., attorney **Ronald Rodriguez** has been named a finalist for the 2010 Public Justice Trial Lawyer of the Year Award for his victory against private prison company Wackenhut Correction Corp., in the beating death of an honorably discharged National Guardsman who was nearing the end of a six-month sentence.

Rodriguez brought the case against Wackenhut, 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. De la Rosa was attacked in the prison yard in Raymondville, Tex., 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.

To prevail, Rodriguez had to employ a cutting-edge trial strategy, which included extending negligence theories to the duties owed to prisoners by private correctional facilities – an area of uncharted law in Texas.

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.

Rodriguez is one of five finalists for the award, bestowed annually upon plaintiffs' attorneys who won verdicts, judgments or settlements in cases that pitted them against powerful government agencies or well-heeled private corporations – or both – requiring extraordinary work and dedication.