

Santiago Ventura Morales Exoneration Case

By Aliza Kaplan and Elaine Morado

In 1986, Mixtec farmworker Santiago Ventura Morales was wrongfully convicted of murder at the end of a trial where he was given a Spanish interpreter rather than one who spoke his Indigenous language. Following extensive advocacy and media coverage, the conviction was overturned in 1991, which helped spur reforms in Oregon's court interpreter standards and language-access services.

In the early 1980s, when he was about fourteen years old, Ventura Morales had left his hometown of San Miguel Cuevas, a Mixtec village in Oaxaca, Mexico, to work in the United States. He worked on farms in Oregon and California and diligently sent money from his earnings to his family. On July 13, 1986, he joined more than a hundred people gathered for a child's birthday party near the strawberry fields at Sandy Farms, about four miles southwest of Sandy, Oregon. Sometime during the party that night a drunken fight broke out. When two men got into a car and drove off through the fields, Ventura Morales and five others chased them in a truck. They found the car abandoned and proceeded to vandalize it, leaving the vehicle on fire.

The following morning, a worker found the body of one of the men, Ramiro Lopez Fidel, who had been stabbed twice in the chest. Police arrested seven men from the camp, including eighteen-year-old Ventura Morales, who admitted that he had vandalized the car but denied stabbing Lopez Fidel. A police deputy later testified that he had known Ventura Morales was guilty because he would not look him in the eye, failing to recognize that for Mixtec men it is disrespectful to make eye contact with one's elders. Ventura Morales was taken to the Clackamas County sheriff's office and was charged with murder. His trial was held that September.

Ventura Morales's trial was marked by numerous issues. The main witness for the prosecution initially testified that he had seen nothing except the burning car. During a recess, however, the witness was called into the prosecutor's office, and when he continued his testimony he claimed that he saw Ventura Morales stab Lopez Fidel.

The physical evidence presented at the trial included a knife that belonged to Ventura Morales. A forensic analysis had found no traces of blood on the knife, but a state medical examiner supported the prosecution's "Fat Theory," which held that the knife had been wiped clean when Ventura Morales had pulled it out of the victim's body. No independent forensics expert examined the knife.

Throughout the proceedings, the Mixtec participants, including Ventura Morales and witnesses for the prosecution, were given a Spanish interpreter rather than one who spoke their native language, causing them to be confused about what people said. In addition, Ventura Morales's attorney did not inform him of his right to testify; at least one juror later said that his absence from the stand caused her to believe he was guilty.

On October 2, 1986, the jury unanimously convicted Ventura Morales of murder. He was sentenced to serve ten years to life in prison and was sent to the Oregon State Correctional Institution in Salem.

Soon after the trial, jury members Sherien Jaeger, Patricia Lee, and David Ralls began sharing doubts about Ventura Morales's guilt, first amongst themselves and then publicly. The defense team's translator recounted the events of the trial to a friend, Donna Slepach, who spent time with Ventura Morales to teach him to speak English. She soon became convinced of his innocence and formed the Santiago Freedom Committee. She also consulted with John Haviland and Lourdes de Leon, anthropologists at Reed College, who explained to her why Ventura Morales had avoided eye contact with the police. They also pointed out that Ventura Morales and many of the witnesses spoke Mixtec and spoke only rudimentary Spanish.

A prominent Salem attorney, Paul J. DeMuniz, agreed to take the case pro bono. His investigation found that some of the state's witnesses had given false testimony against Ventura Morales, and a witness who had not testified reported that he had seen a man chasing Lopez Fidel into the field before Ventura Morales and others arrived at the scene. That man had told the witness that he had killed Lopez Fidel. DeMuniz also hired a forensic expert who determined that the "Fat Theory" was

incorrect.

Support for Ventura Morales grew as the *Oregonian* and national media outlets, including The Oprah Winfrey Show, reported on the case. Contributors to the Santiago Freedom Committee ranged from local bankers to migrant laborers, hundreds of whom pooled their small donations to raise \$1,040 for the cause.

In August 1990, Ventura Morales testified at a hearing for a new trial before Marion County Circuit Court Judge Duane Ertsgaard. On January 8, 1991, the judge found that Ventura Morales's original attorney had denied him his constitutional right to testify and had failed to call an expert witness to challenge the prosecution's claims about the murder weapon. He overturned the conviction and ordered a new trial. After Oregon Governor Neil Goldschmidt offered to issue a conditional pardon in the event of an appeal, the attorney general decided not to appeal. Three months later, the Clackamas County District Attorney dropped the charges. Ventura Morales was released from prison on January 9, 1991.

Ventura Morales attended the University of Portland on a full scholarship, graduating in May 1996 with a bachelor's degree in social work. He returned to San Miguel Cuevas for two years, serving as part of a communal group that settled property disputes and oversaw shared resources, and then worked for the California Rural Legal Assistance in Fresno, California. In 2002, he joined the Oregon Law Center's Indigenous Project, which provides services to Indigenous Mexican and Guatemalan farmworkers.

Ventura Morales's case contributed to the passage in 1993 of a law establishing qualification standards for court interpreters in Oregon. As a result, the Oregon Judicial Department established a program, now called Court Language Access Services, that coordinates court interpreter services in more than 200 languages, including sign language, throughout the state. In 1995, Oregon joined two other states to form a consortium, the Council of Language Access Coordinators, that develops, maintains, and administers court interpreting exams. As of 2025, the consortium served more than forty member-states.

Sources

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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