

AGUAS

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and Urbana, the brothers set aside their regular paychecks as welders to open their own restaurant in March 1988 at Fifth and Green streets in Champaign.

Aguas said their venture, "by working hard almost 24/7" has grown to 26 restaurants in five states, most of them run by other siblings.

On that Sunday night, Aguas was alone outside what is known as LaBamba West, 1905 Glenn Park Drive, C, when he saw a sport utility vehicle drive by really close to him.

"A Spanish guy jumped out of the truck and put a gun to my head and said, 'Don't move. I'm going to kill you,'" Aguas said.

Stunned, he went along with their demands, thinking he was about to be robbed or murdered.

"That was the worst mistake I did to let these guys put me in the truck. Don't make that mistake," he counseled.

The "Spanish guy" was later identified as Francisco Villalobos, 33, of Mattoon, a self-employed mechanic, husband and father whose brother worked at the LaBamba restaurant in Charleston. The driver was Terence Merritt, 19, also of Mattoon.

Aguas said he did not recognize either man, but they later told him that they had been following him and Ramiro around for six months.

He said Villalobos sat next to him with a gun in his ribs, threatening to kill him. They drove him to a field off South Mattis Avenue, south of Champaign, where Merritt parked behind a building so they couldn't be seen from the road.

"When they parked the truck, they tell me this is a kidnapping. I say, 'Wow. Okay.' They told me to call my wife and tell her that I'd be out of town with friends for about a week," he said. "She was sleeping. She said, 'OK, whatever.'"

When he hung up the phone, they demanded \$5 million.

"I said, 'For that much money you better kill me. You're not going to get that much money. We don't have that much money,'" he said, adding that Villalobos then wanted to know what the family could come up with.

I've got to do something

Still inside the vehicle, Aguas said he thought of his wife and two children as Villalobos pushed the gun into his side.

"I've got to do something to fight for my life," he said, explaining how he grabbed Villalobos' hand and they struggled over the gun for several minutes. Merritt then put a gun to Aguas' head, convincing him to knock off the bravado. The men took his watch and his clothes and tied his hands and feet with plastic strips referred to as zip ties, used to bundle things.

They got out, and he could hear them calling someone to bring another car. Aguas was able to slip out of the restraints and when he saw a bullet go through the window, he got out and ran about 100 yards to a nearby cornfield, where he fell among the standing stalks.

"I remember thinking I was dying. It was hot. I couldn't move. I was bleeding. I was screaming 'You better kill me.'"



"I think I did a lot of good things in my life. If this is the end of my life, I'll die happy. In my mind I was hoping they would kill me in the hotel (not in a remote location)."

Above: LaBamba owner Antonio Aguas talks about being kidnapped. For the first time since the ordeal last September, Aguas spoke publicly about it Tuesday at his Champaign restaurant.

Left: Mementos from the ordeal hang in Aguas' office. The FBI gave Ramiro Aguas the shirt with a bureau patch.

Danell Hoxsen photo/The News-Gazette

"We're fighting for 10 to 20 minutes. I was on the ground. That's when they beat me in the head with the gun four times," he said. He applied a clump of dirt to the back of his head to staunch the flow of blood.

When they got him up, Aguas decided he'd be submissive.

"They wanted to be in control of me," he said, adding that they tied his hands and feet again but this time covered his mouth and ears with tape and blindfolded him, a condition he'd remain in for the rest of his captivity.

They then stuffed him into the trunk of a small car — he was aware it was a different vehicle but not sure when it arrived — and drove for hours.

"I remember thinking I was dying. It was hot. I couldn't move. I was bleeding. I was screaming 'You better kill me,'" he said, adding that prompted the captors to get him out once.

before they got to their first motel, the first of three locations that week in Indiana.

Negotiations

On Sept. 11, Villalobos made his first contact with Ramiro Aguas, making his demands for cash. Ramiro was in Mexico at the time and contacted authorities in Champaign, setting off a massive effort by both Champaign police and the FBI to get Antonio Aguas home safely.

Aguas said he wasn't really sure when it was day or night, given that he was blindfolded. He talked about a lot of different things with his captors, mostly the younger Merritt.

Villalobos expressed anger with Ramiro for not coming through with the money faster but Aguas said he urged him to be patient, saying it wasn't easy to get the kind of cash they were demanding — \$250,000.

They let him speak with his brother two or three times during the week.

"I was telling (Ramiro) to do what they want. 'I'm fine. Take your time. I'm alive. Don't do anything stupid,'" he said.

Villalobos and Merritt were fond of the Discovery Channel on TV, Aguas said, especially cop shows.

"I would just listen. I was waiting. I got plenty of time for sleeping and thinking, a lot of time to pray," said Aguas, unaware of the many family members and close friends at home doing exactly the same for him.

The kidnappers allowed Aguas, still bound and blindfolded, to lie down to sleep. Once a day, they fed him a Subway sandwich, fare he didn't care for to begin with and now will never be able to eat again.

I had a dream

Once during the week, Aguas said Villalobos and Merritt tied him to a guardrail on a bridge and threatened

to kill him, cut his throat and throw him in a river where they imparted to

Aguas said he was afraid area where he was

"I think I did a my life. If this is die happy," he said hoping they would hotel."

On the night he him, Aguas said he dream about his realistic, it filled confidence that he be over.

On Friday morning upbeat. So were because their mo

"We're friends, and nights together

Aguas said he a Villalobos a list o him to get with th celebration: dogg reties, a bottle of

Villalobos had for Ramiro to det station in Fort Wi getting the money

with Aguas in a n land, Ind., about were being watch

Looking out the said he saw sever in that he feared police.

"I said, 'Shut up retie,'" Aguas sai calm Merritt, wh Aguas and himse police were press

The phone rang sheriff saying he search the room to open the door.

Instead of doing Merritt took a few gun and rip the b hands.

Still fearing Me thing stupid, Agu "We'll pretend we time here."

As Merritt hea open it, the police

"They took me department," he to give him a shir there still with no pants, but he d point.

"I'm free. I can was so hungry. I retie," he said.

That afternoon with Ramiro, to close as a sibling business associat now shared a life

That night, he children, who we was on a trip wh later got a mere a peate respect.

Six months afte grateful to the fe caught his captor to justice.

"They really w the work they we and I appreciate

While he consi person who is ha passed to him, Ag help looking over these days.

"It's not going for the family," h