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Judge in Gunfire Case Is an Unlikely Vendetta Target, Friends Say

By **ALAN FEUER**

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It is, in its way, a classic trajectory: An eager young prosecutor who once fought in the city's violent drug wars is promoted and serves as a judge.



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Fernando M. Camacho's career is just that: vintage New York law-enforcement stuff. He started as a young assistant in the office of [Robert M. Morgenthau](#), the Manhattan district attorney, and was soon knee-deep in drug crews: gangs with names like the Jheri Curls, the Wild Cowboys, the Young Talented Children. His success in the courtroom led to his appointment to the bench, and ever since, he has climbed the legal ladder, passing through the criminal courts of two boroughs and ending up as acting State Supreme Court justice at the behemoth county courthouse in Queens.

But any air of the typical or traditional was swept aside on Tuesday when an unknown gunman pumped four bullets into Justice Camacho's home in Queens. One slug landed in his kitchen, another lodged in a bedroom wall. No one was home at the time. His friends

and colleagues said it was unthinkable that such a man as this — fair, smart, even-tempered — should be the victim of an attack.

“The overview of Camacho,” said Daniel J. Ollen, a private-practice lawyer who worked with him at the district attorney’s office, “is he’s salt of the earth, a great guy, beloved by both sides. He’s got to be the fairest judge in Queens — by far, by a mile. So when I heard it was him I was stunned.”

For the moment, investigators are working on a theory that the attack resulted from a dispute between neighbors, a law enforcement official said, and that the judge’s house in Oakland Gardens may, in fact, have been shot by mistake. They added that the judge, when asked to name anyone from his past who might wish him harm, mentioned a drug dealer he sent to prison nearly 15 years ago, but that man is not a suspect in the case.

Justice Camacho declined requests for an interview. But a telling story of his fierceness on the job appears in Michael Stone’s “Gangbusters,” a true-crime book on how the Homicide Investigation Unit of the district attorney’s office took down the Jheri Curls (known for their shaved temples and slick curled hair on top) and other gangs in a series of high-profile prosecutions in the early 1990s. Mr. Stone quotes Walter Arsenault, then the chief of the unit, reminiscing on his former colleague’s profound desire to clean the scourge of crack cocaine from Washington Heights.

“Camacho had this idea of taking back the Heights block by block,” Mr. Arsenault said, according to the book, “just marching up Audubon and Broadway and taking down every gang along the way. The precinct detectives all said he was crazy, that there were too many crews, that they weren’t organized in a way that you could take them down together. But privately I agreed with him. We were sending a message: If you killed people in Manhattan, we were coming after you, and we were the biggest, toughest gang around.”

The homicide unit was at that time focused on the city’s war on drugs, a team of seasoned prosecutors with a mandate to attack crack gangs at the moment of their bloodiest violence. Originally formed as a cold-case murder squad, the unit’s mission switched somewhat, said Ellen Corcella, a former member, and began to develop drug cases to obtain leverage against gangsters and eventually win their help in solving murders.

Justice Camacho, a Spanish speaker, had particular expertise in Dominican gangs, said Ms. Corcella, now in private practice in Indiana. “I always thought that Fernando was terrific,” she added. “He had a very good head on his shoulders and was a quick learner.”

After studying law at [Fordham University](#), and spending three years at the Wall Street law firm Balsam Felber & Goldfield and more than a decade at the district attorney’s office, where he met his wife, Andrea, Justice Camacho was appointed to the bench in 1997 by Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#). He spent four years in Brooklyn Criminal Court, then moved on to a similar post in Queens. He has served as a presiding judge of the Domestic Violence Court in Queens and as a deputy supervising judge of the Queens Criminal Court. In May, the State Senate confirmed his nomination to the State Court of Claims, which is the forum for civil litigation seeking damages against the State of New York.

Mark I. Cohen, a lawyer who met Justice Camacho in the early 1990s, said the judge never fell prey to prosecutorial zealotry and was “not a guy with single-minded blinders on, over the top, trying to send someone away for 20 years.”

“The way to describe him is, he’s completely even-tempered and completely decent,” Mr. Cohen said. “He’s what you’d call a true public — and I underline ‘public’ — servant.”
