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Boy who survived recalls fatal Mexico bus attack

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ARTICLE

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CLEBURNE -- Last week, Mike Hartsell was an ordinary 10-year-old, teasing his sisters during a family vacation in Mexico over the Christmas holidays.

That changed in a matter of minutes.

He is one of two children in his family who survived a deadly gun attack on their bus in the Mexican state of Veracruz -- where violence has escalated as two Mexican drug cartels battle.

More than a half-dozen passengers were killed, including Mike's mother, Maria, his 18-year-old half sister, Karla, and his 13-year-old sister, Cristina.

In one of his first interviews since returning to North Texas late Tuesday with his 15-year-old sister, Angie, Mike talked to the *Star-Telegram* on Wednesday about the horror of that day, four days before Christmas.

He also talked about missing his father, who was recently sentenced to six years in prison on a charge of prohibited sexual contact.

His paternal grandmother, Margaret Schneider of Cleburne, is working to get his father released from custody.

Mike -- who family members say has been uncharacteristically reserved and quiet since returning home -- said he can't stop thinking about his mother, his sisters and the deadly bus ride he knows he was fortunate to survive.

"I couldn't believe it happened," he said. "It feels like a dream."

'I want to be with him'

The Hartsells had gone to Mexico to be with his mother's family against the advice of their relatives in Texas, who were concerned with the dangerous conditions there. The American consulate has asked U.S. citizens to use caution when traveling to Veracruz and to avoid intercity travel at night.

Mike said the bus they were riding on was driving through a rural area when it was suddenly stopped and he saw Mexican robbers -- who he called "Mafia" -- board. They shot the driver and began walking through the bus, slapping and threatening passengers.

When one of the robbers approached his sister, Angie, who has Down syndrome, his mother told the man to leave her alone, saying "she's special."

But "he slapped my sister and my mom went over and started hitting him," Mike said during a telephone interview conducted at his grandmother's home.

Leniency is sought for jailed father of 2 Cleburne kids who survived Mexico attack

Cleburne boy, 10, saw his mom and sister fatally shot on bus in Mexico

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The man spoke in Spanish, shoved Maria Hartsell to the floor of the bus and left. Then he returned quickly, this time carrying a gun.

"He shot my mom and she fell down," Mike said quietly.

His mother fell back on Karla, and as the man kept shooting, the bullets passed through Maria Hartsell, also killing her oldest daughter, family members said.

When his sister Cristina, who family members call "Tina," called out to try to help her mother, she also was shot and killed, he said.

"When my mom got shot, I screamed at the same time my sister did and I tried to go to my mom, but my cousin held me back," he said. "Another cousin tried to help my mom, but he got shot. ... A guy near us told me to hush because he didn't want to get shot, too."

The gunmen were later killed by soldiers.

Maria, Karla and Cristina were buried in Mexico after the family couldn't raise the \$6,000 the Mexican morgue said was necessary to bring them back to Texas.

He said Mexican officials gave him his mom's purse and he often touches it and looks through it.

"I'm thinking about her a lot," he said.

After several days, family members were able to pick up Mike and Angie, who went into shock during the shootings, and bring them back to the United States.

Mike has been to the hospital for a sore throat, some bumps and a rash on his hands. He also got medicine for a virus he got from tainted drinking water.

Now all he wants is to be with his father. He went to see him in the Burnet County Jail late Tuesday before returning home to Cleburne.

He said he talked to him for about 30 minutes through a glass barrier about what he had gone through.

"He said he loved me and I told him I loved him," the 10-year-old said. "I want to be with him. Me and Angie want to be with him."

'Only parent he has'

Schneider and Fort Worth attorney Paul Enlow are trying to contact criminal justice officials, seeking some sort of probation or early parole that would allow Mike's dad -- who has Huntington's disease that leads to mental and physical illness -- to be with his surviving children.

The father, whose name is also Mike Hartsell, agreed to a plea bargain this month with the Johnson County district attorney's office that includes a six-year sentence for committing prohibited sexual conduct, Enlow said.

The district attorney's office did not return a telephone call Wednesday from the *Star-Telegram* seeking comment.

The elder Mike Hartsell was convicted of having improper contact with his stepdaughter Karla -- a charge he both denied and confessed to at one point after lengthy interrogation, which Enlow chalked up to his illness.

No one has elaborated about the charge, saying only that it involves prohibited sexual conduct under Section 25.02 in the Texas Penal Code, which notes that sexual activity is a crime between many categories of people -- including stepparents and their current or previous stepchildren.

Hartsell has a criminal history that dates to 2003, including a family violence conviction. He is on suicide watch at the Burnet facility, Enlow said.

Schneider said little about her son's conviction. She said her son was afraid that if he didn't accept the plea bargain, he might end up in prison for decades.

She said she hopes there's a way he can be released early from prison to help raise his surviving children.

"Little Mike loves his dad so much," Schneider said. "He's the only parent he has left."

(Unfortunately, comments on this story have veered too far off course and into the realm of ad hominem attacks and bigotry. So commenting has been disabled. -- Editors)

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