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Former TV chef held in alleged murder-for-hire plot

Juan-Carlos Cruz, of Food Network's 'Calorie Commando,' asked homeless men to kill someone, police say.

By Sam Quinones and Andrew Blankstein, Los Angeles Times

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Not so long ago, Juan-Carlos Cruz was an anonymous young chef just getting started in a culinary arts career.

But in less than a decade, he went from being a chubby sous chef in a hotel to a trim and handsome television chef and cookbook author, who taught classes on preparing low-calorie meals.

Today, he sits in a Los Angeles County jail cell, booked on suspicion of solicitation to commit murder, his bail set at \$5 million.

Santa Monica police say Cruz, 48, of Westwood, asked homeless men to commit homicide for him. After one of the homeless men told police, investigators launched a weeklong undercover operation that ended with Cruz's arrest in a Cheviot Hills dog park on Thursday.

Police have said little publicly about the alleged plot and declined to name a target, a motive, or how and where the alleged hit was supposed to occur. Police have said, however, that they informed the alleged target.

On Saturday, neighbors and co-workers told The Times it was difficult to reconcile the accusations of police with the man they had come to know — a devout churchgoer, community volunteer and doting husband.

"He's a fine guy. I find this hard to believe," said one neighbor, who asked to remain anonymous.

A Knights of Columbus member who attended St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church, Cruz was a dog owner who volunteered at Love on 4 Paws, a therapy program that provides animals to sick children.

Cruz's wife, Jennifer Campbell, his high-school sweetheart, worked long hours as an attorney, neighbors said. He was often seen walking the couple's two dogs outside the Westside condominium complex where they have lived for many years.

Born the youngest of three sons to Dominican immigrants, Cruz came to the United States at age 3 and grew up in Arcadia, according to news articles and his book biography.

His website says he graduated from the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco in 1993. He married Campbell, to whom, he told a reporter in 2005, he served breakfast in bed every

morning.

From 1996 to 2001, he was a pastry sous chef at the Hotel Bel-Air, where, according to his website, he fashioned pastries for celebrities such as Jack Nicholson, Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith, Joe Namath, Nancy Reagan and Julia Roberts.

Encouraged by praise for his creations, he left the hotel to form pastrydude.com, a pastry and wedding-cake service, which appears to no longer exist. Later, he also started Calorie Commando Catering, which also no longer exists.

Along the way, he created a television show, "Cruising in the Kitchen," that aired on a local California public-access station. That led to a featured appearance on the premiere season of Discovery Health network's "Body Challenge," on which he shed 43 pounds. He lost 17 more pounds after the show ended, according to his biography.

Cruz submitted a clip of the show to the Food Network. In 2004, the network signed him to produce the television show "Calorie Commando," in which guests challenged him to prepare their favorite meals with fewer calories while retaining the taste — dishes included peanut butter cookies and mashed sweet potato casserole topped with caramelized bananas. His motto became "keep the taste while you trim your waist."

Cruz produced some 39 episodes of "Calorie Commando" before it was cancelled in 2006.

In 2007, he published a cookbook — "The Juan-Carlos Cruz Calorie Countdown Cookbook" — co-authored with Los Angeles-based writer Martha Rose Shulman.

Cruz is scheduled to be arraigned on Monday, according to authorities.