

Enrique "Kiki" Camarena (1948-1985)



Enrique Camarena never asked to be a hero. In 1985, when he was murdered by drug dealers in Mexico, they ended his life but not his dream. Here is his story.

Growing up in a dirt-floored house in Mexico, Enrique Camarena wanted to make a difference. When he was little, he begged his mother for a toy gun. "I need a gun," he said, "because I'm going to be a policeman when I grow up." At nine, Kiki moved with his family to the United States to pick fruit.

After excelling in high school, Kiki faced a critical turning point. His friends were headed for trouble, and he had to decide whether he wanted to follow them into a life of crime and drugs. The deeply engrained desire to make a difference won out, and Kiki opted to stay straight, working his way through college and earning a degree in criminal justice.

Following stints in the Marines and the police force, Kiki joined the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in 1974. It was the best way he knew to stop drugs and to help people he cared about. His mother, concerned about dangers inherent in his job, tried to talk him out of it. **"I can't not do this,"** he told her. **"I'm only one person, but I want to make a difference."**

Camarena's work became famous all over the United States and Latin America. He infiltrated drug trafficking bands and successfully helped break up many of them, confiscating thousands of pounds of cocaine and hundreds of thousands of pounds of marijuana. He managed to keep his face out of the newspapers and other media despite the fact his name was well known.

Kiki had been in Mexico 4-1/2 years on the trail of Mexico's marijuana and cocaine barons. In early 1985, Kiki asked to be transferred to Guadalajara, Mexico, the center of the drug trafficking empire, to work undercover. For weeks he lived among the drug cartel, gathering information and evidence, and he was close to unlocking a multibillion dollar drug-pipeline, which he suspected involved officers in the Mexican army, police and government. Kiki was due to be reassigned in three weeks, when his identity was discovered.

On Thursday, February 7, 1985, at about 2:00 p.m. Kiki locked his badge and his service revolver in his desk drawer and left to meet his wife for lunch. According to DEA's reconstruction of events, Kiki crossed the street to his pickup truck, turned off the truck's burglar alarm with his key, and unlocked his door. Before he could get into the cab and grab the two-way radio with which he could alert his partners, he was grabbed by five men, who shoved him into a beige Volkswagen van, and sped away. This was the last time anyone but his kidnapers would see him alive.



One month later, Kiki Camarena's body and that of his informant, Alfredo Zavala Avelar, were discovered in a shallow grave, 70 miles from Michoacan, Mexico. They had been tortured, beaten, and brutally murdered. Enrique Camarena, 37 years old, left behind a wife, Mika (34) and three sons, Enrique (11), Daniel (6), and Erick (4).



News of the tragedy hit newspapers, radio stations, and television news broadcasts. To honor Camarena's memory, and to show that they would continue his fight against illegal drugs, friends and neighbors wore red badges of satin. Parents who had come together in local coalitions to fight the drug problem took Kiki as their model, embracing his belief that one person can make a difference, and adopting his symbol--the red ribbon--as their own. This began the continuing tradition of wearing and displaying red ribbons as a symbol of intolerance towards the use of drugs.

In 1988, the National Federation of Parents for Drug Free Youth joined with DEA and implemented an eight-day Red Ribbon campaign that spread to places as far away as Europe. **The National Red Ribbon Week is celebrated every year during the last week of October. The purpose of the Red Ribbon Campaign is to present a unified and visible commitment toward the creation of a DRUG-FREE AMERICA, and is dedicated to Enrique "Kiki" Camarena and all of the people who have been wrongly killed due to the violence of drugs.**

Camarena's legend grew even more after his death: movies about him were produced in Mexico, in November of 1988, Time Magazine had him on their cover, and in 1990, a U.S television mini-series about Camarena won an Emmy award (Drug Wars: The Camarena Story). He had received numerous awards while with the DEA, and after his death, he was given the Administrator's Award of Honor, the highest award given by the organization. The DEA hosts a yearly golf tournament in Miami in his honor.

The United States government pursued a lengthy investigation of Camarena's murder: due to the difficulty of extraditing Mexican citizens, the FBI went as far as to have one suspect, Humberto Alvarez-Machain, kidnapped by bounty hunters and taken into the United States. Despite vigorous protests from the Mexican government, Alvarez was tried in United States District Court in Los Angeles, but the trial resulted in an acquittal.