

Dylcia Pagan, 77, Dies; Puerto Rican Nationalist Who Spent 19 Years in Prison

She was among 10 members of the F.A.L.N., a terrorist group, who were convicted on arms and conspiracy charges in 1981. She was granted clemency by President Bill Clinton.



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By Trip Gabriel

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Dylcia Pagan, a Bronx-born Puerto Rican nationalist who was convicted of seditious conspiracy and spent 19 years in prison before being granted clemency by President Bill Clinton under the condition that she renounce violence, died on June 30 in Carolina, P.R. She was 77.

Her son, Ernesto Gomez Gomez, said the cause of her death, in a hospital, was cardiorespiratory failure.

Ms. Pagan was one of the most high-profile of the 10 members of a domestic terror group, Armed Forces for National Liberation, known by its Spanish initials, F.A.L.N., who were convicted on arms and conspiracy charges in 1981. The defendants refused to mount a defense at their federal trial in Chicago, claiming that they were prisoners of war.

The authorities said the 10 were the core of the F.A.L.N., one of the homegrown revolutionary movements of the 1970s that, along with the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army, staked out an extreme fringe of the New Left by

embracing terroristic violence but had little popular support.

The F.A.L.N. claimed responsibility for 120 bombings in New York and other cities from 1974 to 1983 in the name of Puerto Rican independence. The wave of terrorism included a bombing at the historic Fraunces Tavern in Lower Manhattan in 1975 that killed four people.

Ms. Pagan's 55-year sentence was the lightest received by the 10 defendants; she owed her particular notoriety to the fact that she was in a relationship with William Morales, an F.A.L.N. leader who was then a fugitive. The trial judge said he believed that Ms. Pagan acted under his influence.

Mr. Morales had blown off parts of both of his hands and nearly blinded himself in 1978 in an apartment in East Elmhurst, Queens, that the police called a "bomb factory."

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Despite his injuries, he staged a spectacular escape from a window of the prison ward of Bellevue Hospital in 1979 and fled to Mexico. He was captured after a shootout four years later and served time in a Mexican prison. After his release, Mexico refused a request from the United States for his extradition, and Mr. Morales went to Cuba.

In an interview with The Plain Dealer of Cleveland in 1993, he defended the Fraunces Tavern bombing. "Those people who died," he said, "were businessmen who contributed to the debasement of the Puerto Rican people through corporate exploitation to the island."

Mr. Gomez Gomez, who is the son of Mr. Morales and Ms. Pagan — he was born in 1979 and raised by foster parents in Mexico — said his birth father was “a political refugee” in Cuba, and that he now shuns interviews and visitors.

President Clinton’s clemency grant in September 1999 to Ms. Pagan and 11 other members of the F.A.L.N., none of whom had been convicted of crimes that resulted in deaths or injuries, followed a broad campaign for their release. It included appeals on humanitarian grounds from former President Jimmy Carter, Representative Nydia M. Velazquez of New York and Cardinal John O’Connor, the archbishop of New York.



Ms. Pagan was released from a low-security federal prison in Dublin, Calif., on Sept. 10, 1999, after serving 19 years of a 55-year sentence. President Bill Clinton granted her clemency. Her son, Ernesto, was with her. Lou Dematteis/Reuters

But the grants of clemency were denounced by law enforcement agencies, by Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York and even by Hillary Rodham Clinton, the first lady, who said the jailed nationalists had not shown sufficient remorse.

In an interview in Puerto Rico with Mireya Navarro of The New York Times several months after her release, Ms. Pagan said she had no regrets about her time with the F.A.L.N. or her years behind bars.

“To me it was well worth it,” she said. “We’ve been examples of people committed to struggle. If you believe in something that much, you’re prepared to suffer the consequences.”

Dylcia Noemi Pagan was born on Oct. 15, 1946, in the South Bronx and raised in East Harlem. She was the only child of Sebastian Pagan Arenas, a plumber who had been an activist with the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, and Noemi Rivera. Both her parents died when Dylcia was in her teens.

A talented dancer and singer, Dylcia performed as a child on local television shows in the New York City area, according to her son. As a student at Brooklyn College in 1970, she was a founder of the Puerto Rican Student Union, which campaigned for Puerto Rican studies to be added to the curriculum.

She pursued a career in television production, her son said — first on “Realidades,” a PBS series featuring Hispanic artists, and later at WGBH in Boston.

Vicente Alba, who was a member of the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican civil rights group, met Ms. Pagan in this period. He recalled in an interview that she felt passionately that Puerto Rico, which has the status of a commonwealth, was still treated as a U.S. colony and needed to be liberated.

“It is not a question of Dylcia choosing violence because she was a violent person,” he said. “It’s a question of responding to the violence of the empire against the people of Puerto Rico.”

Gloria Quinones, a childhood friend who worked for years to win the release of Ms. Pagan and other F.A.L.N. members, said that after Ms. Pagan lost her parents at a young age, F.A.L.N. had become a substitute family.

After her conviction, Ms. Pagan served her sentence in a low-security federal prison in Dublin, Calif.

In addition to her son, she is survived by two granddaughters.



Ms. Pagan in 2013. After her release from prison, she told The New York Times that she had no regrets about her time with the F.A.L.N. or her years behind bars. Vagabond

In Puerto Rico after her release, she lived in the town of Loiza, east of San Juan, where she made sculptures and other artwork.

Although some of the island's three million residents, who are U.S. citizens, have passionately embraced the independence movement, it is not broadly popular: In the commonwealth's 2020 general election, the Independence Party's candidate for governor won only 13.5 percent of the vote.

Ms. Pagan enjoyed a low-key celebrity. "She was widely recognized," her son said, "and it was very common if you went out with her to an event, people would come up and pay her respect and ask for pictures."

He said his mother expressed no remorse about the violence the F.A.L.N. committed.

"I think if you're going to judge a person's actions, you have to do it according to their times," he said. "The '70s and early '80s were crazy times all over the world. They believed it was the right thing to do at the moment.

"She never regretted being a member of F.A.L.N.," he added. "She was very proud of what she did for the freedom of Puerto Rico."

Trip Gabriel is a Times reporter on the Obituaries desk. More about Trip Gabriel