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Homicide unit battles rising tide

Acquiring strong evidence and truth priorities of department

By Ben Gelinas, *The Edmonton Journal* January 3, 2009

Four retirements and a reassignment have forced the city police homicide unit to bring in "fresh eyes" to stare down a persistent problem, the heads of the unit say.

Among the experienced officers brought into homicide in 2008 is Staff Sgt. Bill Spinks, a 23-year force veteran who used to work undercover on major crimes and most recently ran vice and missing persons. Spinks started his new job two months ago, sharing supervisory duties with Staff Sgt. Lorne Pubantz, a unit mainstay and former homicide detective.

An additional detective position was added to the unit in 2008. "Fifteen are operational detectives and two are dedicated to historical homicides," Pubantz says. They sought detectives with diverse backgrounds and a history of dedication to policing.

"Being a homicide investigator in many respects is a lifestyle as opposed to a career," Pubantz says.

Spinks says: "That's an understatement, not just for you, but for your family."

The new officers inherit an uphill battle. By last count, the unit's case clearance rate dipped from 35 per cent in 2007 to an estimated 31 per cent in 2008. While the supervisors do feel pressure from the public and higher-ups to put in a complete case as soon as possible, securing strong evidence is priority.

"The numbers will speak for themselves after a good, thorough investigation," Pubantz says. "It's not like a salesman who's got a performance goal that he's got to go out and sell so many widgets. We're

not in the widget business. We're in the search-for-the-truth business. And there are so many diverse circumstances that can either present the truth to us or prevent the truth from coming out that we have no control over."

The New Year's Eve stabbing death of an 18-year-old man in the middle of 51st Avenue will likely nudge the city's homicide count to 35, up two from 2007 but short of the record 39 homicides set in 2005. Eight men were apparently slain in 2008 because of their involvement in gangs. Eight more had links to organized crime that may have played a role in their deaths. Charges in gang-related homicides have largely eluded investigators, who struggle to glean info from people who won't talk to police.

"We don't know what's going on within their groups," Pubantz says. "Just because they have the right to silence doesn't mean silence is the right thing to do."

Certain cases tended to rise above others in the public eye. That's the case with Johnny Altinger's alleged death. Police allege he died at the hands of an Edmonton filmmaker who scripted and made a movie that police said played out similarly in real life.

"Every time we talk about a high-profile case, I truly believe it should not detract from those that may be such as an inner-city killing," Pubantz says.

"No one deserves to die a violent death at the hands of another. You have one opportunity to live on this Earth and it's not anybody's right to take that away."

Of last year's city homicides, 14 people were shot to death, 15 died of stab wounds, two people were fatally beaten and two were strangled. The cause of death in two cases was not released.

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Edmonton's 2008 Homicides

1. Randy George Lintner, 46, died from a punch to the head when he tried to break up a late-night brawl Jan. 13 in the parking lot of the Canadian Brewhouse at 97th Street and 127th Avenue. Witnesses said Lintner was trying to call police on his cellphone when some of the men involved in the fight attacked him. His homicide remains unsolved.
2. James Mills, 46, was attacked by a group of men outside the Greyhound bus station at 103rd Street and 103rd Avenue on Jan. 8. The Quebec man was badly beaten and left unconscious on the sidewalk. He died in hospital 11 days later. Police have made no arrests.
3. Westleigh Michael LaFleur, 25, was shot in the chest when three or four masked men broke into a townhouse at 11205 90th St. on Jan. 22. No arrests have been made.
4. Troy Ryan Poulin, 20, was stabbed multiple times Feb. 2. and died at 63rd Avenue near 106th Street. Police said Poulin had gang ties and his friends described him as a regular guy drawn into a "very unfortunate lifestyle." The homicide remains under investigation.
5. Beverly Parker, 49, was allegedly strangled to death Feb. 29 on her front lawn. Her son Keshroy Hillary Bristol, 18, and his girlfriend, Delmy Concepcion Vega-Medrano, 19, were charged with first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder.
6. Shernell Sharon Pierre, 26, was found shot to death inside her charred Toyota Corolla, which was set on fire at 170th Street near 87th Avenue shortly after the Misericordia Hospital nurse finished her evening shift March 12. Police believe she was killed by someone she knew.
7. Daniel Raymond McKenzie, 23, was stabbed repeatedly March 21 outside his aunt's house on 124th Avenue near 82nd Street. His body was found on a neighbour's lawn. Police arrested the group

believed to be responsible but detectives determined that they acted in self-defence and no charges were laid.

8. Sean Allan Kier, 23, was stabbed March 29 during a fight just before last call outside the Diesel Ultra Lounge at 11845 Wayne Gretzky Drive. Kier had gang ties. His homicide is still under investigation.

9. Alan Cumming, 38, was stabbed to death, apparently for the tips he had earned driving a school bus full of partying people on an April 12 pub crawl. Cumming had just finished work and parked his bus a block from his apartment at 12130 82 Street at 3 a.m. His killing remains unsolved.

10. Hans Alberts, 77, was helping his wife into their car after an afternoon anniversary meal at the Royal Fork Buffet on Stony Plain Road near 149th Street on April 16, when he was repeatedly stabbed in the parking lot. Haldane Jensen-Huot, 23, was charged with first-degree murder.

11. Cory Cackle, 25, was found dead April 20 in the backyard of a stranger's home on 40th Avenue and 62nd Street. He was stabbed to death in a fight with another man, who had to be hospitalized, Cackle's girlfriend said. No one has been charged.

12. Ashley Quintin Charest, 28, died from a shot to the chest in the parking lot of a condo at 139th Avenue and 27th around 1:30 a.m. on May 15. Police said he was meeting with someone in the lot. No one has been charged.

13. Chantel Brittnay Robertson, 20, was strangled to death June 28 over her \$100 escort arrival fee at a home at 9853 80th Avenue, according to a search warrant entered into court records. Police found her body in a shallow grave at the side of the house and charged Matthew Todd Barrett, 24, with first-degree murder and offering an indignity to a body. He has yet to enter his plea.

14. Scott Ladouceur, 24, was shot twice in the back of the head on July 2. His friend Marlon Williams was also seriously injured in the attack at 167th Avenue and 18th Street. Both men had links to

criminal activity. Williams has since fled the country. Ladouceur's homicide remains unsolved.

15. Christopher Byron Lord, 33, was shot on July 26 in a park west of 96th Avenue near 176th Street. He died at the Misericordia Hospital shortly after being dropped off by an unidentified woman. Lord was well known to police and the investigation into his death is ongoing.

16. Deang Huon, 40, was allegedly murdered by her husband Narin Sok, 49. Her body was discovered in the bedroom of the couple's apartment at 10955 106th Street on July 30. Sok was charged with second-degree murder.

17. Andrew Livingston O'Brien, 42, was shot to death Aug. 5 on 108th Street, just off the Avenue of Nations, where the crack addict spent many nights without a roof over his head. No one has been charged.

18. Terence Dashielle Miller, 26, was shot to death August 17 in the parking lot behind the Canadian Native Friendship Centre at 11205 106 Street. No one has been charged.

19. Nasir Mohamed Said, 22, was the first of four Somali men from Toronto shot to death in Edmonton last year. His body was discovered Sept. 16 by a construction worker at Balwin School an hour before classes started. Said was shot in the head. His homicide is still under investigation.

20. Arfan UI Haq, 30, was left riddled with bullets in the driver's seat of his sports car shortly after leaving the Empire Ballroom at West Edmonton Mall on Sept. 21. His body was discovered in the car which was left idling at a set of lights off Whitemud Drive and 170th Street. Police have yet to solve his murder.

21. Sean Stuart Auger, 24, was stabbed to death in an alley off Whyte Avenue and Gateway Boulevard during a fight between two groups as the bars let out on Sept. 21. Ralph Eugene Pike, 32, was charged with second-degree murder.

22. David Owen O'Donnell, 57, died Sept. 25 after being stabbed in his apartment suite at 4608 118 Avenue. His common-law wife, Norma Elaine Janvier, 38, was charged with second-degree murder.

23. John Brian Altinger, 38, went missing Oct. 10 after he was allegedly lured to a garage at 57th Street and 40 Avenue on the promise of a sexy date with a woman he was exchanging messages with online. Altinger's body hasn't been recovered. Mark Andrew Twitchell, a 29-year-old filmmaker, has been charged with first-degree murder.

24. Ross Dwayne Firby, 46, was stabbed to death Oct. 25 after an alleged fight with his ex-girlfriend in an apartment suite at 1178 Hooke Road. No one has been charged.

25. Lawrence Bosiak, 77, was gunned down in the stairwell of his apartment building at 3757 139 Avenue on Oct. 26. He was shot with a rare German pistol. No one has been charged.

26. Abas Akubar, 21, was found shot to death Oct. 31 in a field on 140th Avenue near 92nd Street. The young member of the Somali community moved to Edmonton from the Toronto area a few months before his death. The killing is still under investigation.

27. Quentin L'hirondelle, 22, died of a stab wound to the chest during a Nov. 8 brawl at an all-night party in an apartment suite at 10617 107 Street. Police charged Justin Malcolm Sutherland, 21, with second-degree murder.

28. Andrew Stephen Frang, 25, was stabbed to death on Nov. 9, after refusing to give cigarettes to two men on 118th Avenue near 124th Street. No one has been charged.

29. Maia Soukonnik, 60, was allegedly stabbed to death by her 20-year-old son Rostislav Soukonnik in their apartment suite at 9023 184 Street on Nov. 13. A bent samurai sword that appeared to have

been tossed out the suite's window was recovered by detectives. Rostislav, a martial arts aficionado, was charged with second-degree murder.

30. Richard Joseph Whitford, 39, of no fixed address, was stabbed to death Nov. 30 in the stairwell of a walk-up at 11505 107th Avenue. A trail of blood led from the second floor to the back steps of the apartment building, where Whitford's body was found. No one has been charged.

31. Abdul Kadir Mohamoud, 23, a Somali man with connections to the Toronto area, was found beaten and shot to death Dec. 2 in Grand Trunk Park at 109th Street near 130th Avenue . A coat, ball cap and loafers were found next to his body. Mohamoud's homicide remains unsolved.

32. Ahmed Mohammed Abdirahman, 21, was hit multiple times with shotgun blasts in the courtyard of a townhouse complex near 148th Avenue off 88A Street on Dec. 2. He died in a parking lot where many believed drugs are sold. His homicide remains unsolved.

33. Mitchell Chambers, 23, was found shot to death Dec. 7 inside a rental pickup truck, parked outside a home at 4703 188 Street where he was picking up his new girlfriend. Chambers' homicide is still under investigation.

34. A seven-year-old boy died Dec. 21 after he was stabbed in the chest by his five-year-old brother as they fought in their home on 142nd Avenue near 25th Street. Police say the boy couldn't be charged because of his age.

35. An 18-year-old man, whose name has not been released, was found lying face down in the middle of 51st Avenue between 106th and 107th Streets shortly before midnight on New Year's Eve, bleeding from a stab wound to his chest.

-- Compiled by Ben Gelinas

