

Even in retirement, victims strived to protect others

By Michael Matza and Emilie Lounsberry

INQUIRER STAFF WRITERS

They were retired Philadelphia policemen with decades of experience in dangerous jobs. Then a brazen ambush robbery ended their lives.

A gunman opened fire as armored-truck guards Joseph Alullo, 54, and William Widmaier, 65, filled an ATM Thursday morning in Northeast Philadelphia, police said.

Family and coworkers said the men, longtime friends from their days as officers in the Seventh District, knew the security job was risky but enjoyed the benefits of early retirement and active second careers.

"He didn't need the money, but he was the type of guy [who wanted] something to do," said Norman Sinn, Widmaier's stepfather, who raced to his stepson's Fairless Hills home after getting a frantic call around 9 a.m. from his daughter-in-law, Joyce.

The Widmaiers had been married for 42 years; their son, William, said his mother was too distraught to talk.

Widmaier worked for the Pennsauken-based division of the Loomis armored-car company for about 15 years, colleagues said. As a senior staffer among 70 employees, he was the union shop steward, said Lou T. Tartack, president of Local 506 of the Security, Police and Fire Professionals of America.

"Bill was one of these John Wayne kind of people. Anything he did was always for the membership," Tartack said. "He would always say, 'It's for the guys, not me.' "

Relatives said that Widmaier's retirement from the police force had given him more time to indulge his passion for collecting 45 r.p.m. records, and that every Saturday he would be out checking yard sales and flea markets.

He especially liked records from the 1950s, by the Beach Boys, and by Dion and the Belmonts, relatives said.

Widmaier's sister Marilyn Levin, of the Northeast, said the family was shocked by the brutality of the slaying, which police described as preemptive, to facilitate the robbery.

"It's shocking to take a life like that," Levin said. "Money can be replaced. But people can't."

Alullo began his police career in 1973. In the early 1980s, he worked for the K-9 unit. He was promoted to patrol sergeant in the Seventh District.

"Joe and I were personal friends," Seventh District Capt. Joseph Zaffino said. "Our kids are the same age. We went on family vacations together. He was my sergeant when I was a patrol officer. He had the absolute respect of all the officers who worked in our platoon."

Outside the gray clapboard Levittown house that Alullo bought after he retired from the department in 2000, Zaffino said he had just come from breaking the news of the slaying to Alullo's wife, Donna.

Moving with Donna and their three daughters to the Bucks County suburbs from their home in the Northeast was part of Alullo's drive "to do better for his family," Zaffino said. "He always dreamed of having a yard in a quiet neighborhood."

Painted in dappled sunlight Thursday, the bedroom community was completely still as two uniformed officers - one from Philadelphia, the other from Bristol Township - stood vigil outside the house.

"He would have appreciated this," said Alullo's middle daughter, Lisa, holding back tears as she offered the officers cold drinks and mentioned her father's 27 years as a policeman.

"Please don't hesitate," she said. "Cops are always welcome in my house."

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