



The Huntsville Times

Retiring homicide cop takes along perspective, regret for unsolved cases

Monday, March 03, 2008

By **WENDY REEVES**
Times Staff Writer wendy.reeves@htimes.com

Investigator Wayne Sharp has been known to work 30-plus hours with no sleep while looking for a killer.

Most of the time, he's found one.

After 40 years with the Huntsville Police Department, Sharp turned in his badge on Friday, making the toughest decision of his life.

"When you've put your whole life into something it's hard to walk off and leave it," Sharp said. "But if I was 21 years old, I'd do it all again."

Sharp has been a homicide investigator for the Huntsville Police Department for 29 years. Before that, he spent 10 years solving burglaries - after he'd been a patrolman for two years.

He's witnessed a lot of changes in the department. His biggest criticism of how the department is run today: He believes more crimes were solved when investigators were assigned to specialized units rather than the general approach used today.

The exceptions are the drug task force and the Major Crimes Unit, which takes care of homicides, rapes and life-threatening assaults.

"We've probably got the same pattern for some crimes which happen in each precinct but nobody knows it," Sharp said. "They never see each other to talk about it."

For example, he said if a group of investigators are dedicated to all the city's burglaries, it's easier to track the trends because they see everything in the city - not just the ones in their part of town.

"I believe in community policing for the street guys; it's good for them," Sharp said. "But I don't think it's the best approach for investigations. I guess I can say that now. They can't fire me."

Those who have worked with and learned from Sharp say if there's one thing he knows, it's how to investigate a crime.

"He's forgotten more than any of us will ever know," said investigator Kathy Pierce.

Sharp's wealth of experience gives him a unique perspective.

"He can always come up with a new way to look at a case," said investigator David Owens.

Or sometimes, investigator Charlie Gray said, he's seen Sharp ask the simplest of questions - such as,

"What size shirt was she wearing?" - to send a rookie detective scrambling to find the answer to something that had been overlooked while trying to figure out the identity of a homicide victim.

After 29 years dedicated to homicides, Sharp says he's "seen people killed any way there is to be killed."

He has no idea how many cases he's solved.

"That's like asking a cook how many taters he's peeled," Sharp said.

During a luncheon in Sharp's honor on Thursday, Public Safety Director Rex Reynolds gave Sharp a pass key so that he can come back to work any time he wants to. There are a few unsolved murders on the books.

Co-workers say they expect to see Sharp back in his office, doing volunteer work on the cold cases. Plus, he'll be around to testify in pending homicide cases.

Those pending cases and the handful of unsolved cases Sharp has left from those years of work barely filled one cardboard box sitting on his office floor.

That shows how well he's done his job, said Sgt. Ed Cain, supervisor of the Major Crimes Unit.

Although he's helped put many killers in prison, it bothers Sharp that he is leaving any unsolved cases.

"I didn't do enough or there wouldn't be any unsolved cases," he said.

One cold case that stands out to him is the stabbing death of Mamie Mearse. The 51-year-old woman was repeatedly stabbed at her home at 2711 Eighth Ave., on May 29, 1987.

"I still drive by there," Sharp said. "None of the relatives live there, but it makes me think about it."

When it happened, neighbors said they last saw her walking with someone they thought might have been a homeless man who had been cleaned up, Sharp said.

"We found her stabbed in the bathroom," he said. "And the file is probably six inches thick of all the homeless men we picked up, but we've never been able to find him and I wish we could."

A more recent case Sharp hates to leave behind is the murder of a local barber last year.

On Jan. 5, 2007, Christopher Byrd, 32, was shot several times by a man dressed in black. Byrd's body was found in the drainage ditch behind the Better Days barber shop at 2523 Bronco Circle off Sparkman Drive.

The shop was filled with customers when Byrd answered a call on his cell phone and went outside. A few moments later, the customers heard several loud shots and found Byrd's body.

"I hate to give it up," Sharp said.

The unsolved cases will be assigned to other investigators who will continue Sharp's work.

"We're losing a lot of experience," said Police Chief Henry Reyes. "And it's experience that can't be replaced."

Deputy Chief Mark Hudson said Sharp has the kind of expertise that can be learned only "from being there and doing it."

"He is just a dadgum true wealth of information and knowledge on how to commit a murder and how to find out who did it," Hudson said.

And he's taught many investigators over the years.

"If you look around this department you'll see Wayne's fingerprints all over it," Hudson said. "He's played a major role in shaping and motivating this department."

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