

New Minneapolis homicide commander wont quit on this case

MSU graduate

By Ruben Rosario, Pioneer Press staff writer [published in the Pioneer Press, St. Paul, MN]

Most good cops walk around with at least one throbbing, skin-piercing thorn.

And so it is with Minneapolis Police Lt. Lee DeKoven Edwards, the newly appointed commander of the busiest and perhaps most overworked 14-member squad of homicide detectives in the state.

The 15-year police veteran's splinter is named Marcus Potts.

"His middle name is spelled D-E-S-H-A-W-N," notes the 46-year-old Detroit native, father of four and former Mankato State University linebacker and organic chemistry major as he pulls out a folder on the unsolved case from a file cabinet in his tiny, windowless City Hall office.

Edwards was a "new boot," as he describes his rookie cop status, that snowy night of Dec. 15, 1990, when he and officer Dan Gustafson, a Vietnam War veteran who has since retired, responded to a 911 call at 1406 16th Ave. N. He rattles off the facts from memory.

"Stop," said Gustafson, who had entered first through a side door. Here's a man who has seen everything, Edwards thought. This man also was watery-eyed. "Kiddo, prepare yourself."

Edwards thought it was an old man he saw lying in a pool of blood in a rear bedroom. He realized, as he got closer, the victim was a boy.

"He had about 46, 48 stab wounds to his neck and face," Edwards recalled of the 11-year-old victim.

"He was tortured. Why? To this day, I don't know why. But that was a terrible, terrible night. I will never forget it."

Homicides, the most unpredictable but cataclysmic of crimes, are not fully measured in statistics, like the city's ranking of 30th last year among U.S. cities of 250,000 or more residents. Nor are they measured in a homicide squad's percentage of solved cases, which reached a respectable 70 percent for the 54 homicides that had taken place as of Thursday in the state's largest city.

They are measured in grief and the ripple effects.

The child went over to the Tates, trusted neighbors two doors down, because his hard-working mother was taking on a late-evening shift as a bartender at the now defunct Riverside Supper Club.

The boy ate dinner with the neighbors, then headed home to change clothes. He never made it back.

The Tates, emotional wrecks following the slaying, moved out soon after. So did two other families on the block. People who had led drug-free lives became addicted to numb the pain. Jobs were lost.

"With homicides, what makes it so unique is that it just doesn't happen to the victim, it reverberates, like a tsunami," Edwards said. "It builds and builds to a critical mass, speeds up and gets bigger and bigger and ends up destroying families and communities."

Potts was the 55th homicide victim that year. If only life imitated art and such cases were solved in an hour or two. Around the corner from Edwards' office is the "I" room, a conference room with a wall covered with the placards bearing the names of 54 homicide victims in Minneapolis in 2004, as of last Thursday.

The placards, which list the victims' names and dates of the slayings, cover a wall. They are white for solved or red for open cases. More than 70 percent are white, a testament to the team's efforts and to Edwards' predecessor, Lt. Mike Carlson, a veteran homicide investigator who is now a member of a city-FBI squad of terrorism and major crimes sleuths.

"Gangs and dope," Edwards repeats as he points to five of the seven most recent homicides. The chemistry education still resonates at an intellectual level in Edwards, a former police academy drill instructor, police chief's special assistant and precinct-level supervisor who cut his teeth chasing bad guys on the city's north side for several years.

He sees guns, gangbanging and the open drug market in Minneapolis "where pushers can get more bang for their buck than in most other U.S. cities" as omnipresent precursors to lethal violence, as much volatile components as the two parts hydrogen and four parts sulfur that create acid rain.

And the solution is basically the same: Find ways to prevent the mixture from taking place, knowing full well there are many variables beyond the control of a police department or even a concerned community.

"I can't predict the next homicide, but the best we can do is analyze shots fired or where violent crime takes place and become more proactive," he says.

"I would like homicide investigators to network more with the community," he explains. "I may be new to homicide but not to police work. Crimes are being solved with the help of neighborhoods and community residents."

He cites the recent arrest in the cold-blooded and apparently unprovoked shootings of two North Minneapolis convenience store workers on Dec. 18, just three days after he assumed command of the homicide squad.

He gushes like a proud papa in recounting the round-the-clock efforts of his investigators to work that case, resulting in the arrest of a prime suspect in Lancaster, Calif., last week.

"Yes, we knew who did it, and we had witnesses and the videotape. But it was the community that not only fingered the guy, but told us to stop looking in one direction, to look this way, to go west."

Edwards, the only city cop of color sent to the prestigious FBI training academy in Quantico, Va., also may represent a new commitment within the administration to elevate and promote qualified minorities to higher-level managerial and supervisory posts.

He is the great hope of any color, in a sense, to improve relations and build trust between a maligned police force and a major city that came perilously close a few years ago to falling victim to federal government intervention following high-profile disturbances.

Edwards, who has served as head of internal affairs and criminal investigations at the precinct level, credits current Chief William McManus for putting walk into the rhetorical talk about the need to diversify the force from the street level to the decision-making levels.

"He took the time on Christmas Day to personally visit every precinct in the city and at least express his support for the people who had to work that day," he says. "That is true leadership in my book."

Speaking of books, Minneapolis residents are getting a homicide squad commander with life and cultural experiences they perhaps never have seen before.

A small bookshelf in his prison cell-size office contains an eclectic collection of readings, from Malcolm X to the biography of Nelson Mandela to "Slave Patrols," a book that chronicles the little-known policelike squads formed by county courts and state militias in Virginia and the Carolinas through the end of the Civil War that enforced codes governing slaves throughout the South.

"The more a police force reflects the community it serves, the more effective I believe it will be in dealing not only with crime issues, but community issues," he says. "What I'm really proud of is that Minnesotans still consider homicide a big deal. We have not become that jaded, that desensitized to the loss of human life."

As for Potts' killer, a teenage neighborhood resident was suspected. Edwards says, "I think he knows that we know, and he still lives in the area. I will not rest until we get that S.O.B."