

Milwaukie murder case concludes with 30-year jail sentence

- Raymond Rendleman, Milwaukie Review Newspaper
- Mar 20, 2024



Milwaukie police detectives, along with the Clackamas County Major Crimes team, investigate the incident in 2016.

Before he became Milwaukie’s police chief, Luke Strait as a patrol sergeant responded to what he said was one of the most “horrific” 911 calls of his 30-year career as an officer.

Strait didn’t know what to expect when he pulled the patrol car up to the residence at 9545 S.E. 42nd Ave. 911 dispatchers called police to the scene as neighbors heard “sounds of a disturbance with yelling and banging.”

Strait was working the night shift at the time of the call in September 2016. He had been on duty for only 10 minutes when he was dispatched to the scene of what would turn out to be a murder, for which a federal judge this March sent the perpetrator to prison for 30 years.

A man inside the house had also called 911, but these pleas for help became his last words. Strait arrived with other officers to find the home's resident, 57-year-old Phillip Anthony Gatto Jr., had been murdered while fighting for his life behind his bathroom door pleading for help with 911 dispatchers.

"It was a particularly brutal scene and a call that I will remember for the rest of my life," Strait said.

Strait worried that Gatto's assailants might never be found and that dangerous criminals would continue to be free to roam at large. Before fleeing the scene, the suspects had shot Gatto 11 times through the bathroom door, which was now pierced with a total of 18 bullets.

"Our people see and deal with a lot of stuff while out on patrol, and some of it over the years really stands out," Strait said.

Milwaukie police immediately jumped into action, calling for assistance from partner agencies and racking up many hours of overtime. Strait said that some officers talked with their peer support team members who referred them to chaplains and clinicians to provide police employees with immediate access to mental health resources.

Strait said that he didn't think any officers asked for time off to recover from the mental trauma of witnessing the murder's aftermath.

"If you're in your normal workweek, we can say, 'OK, you need a couple of days off,' but it's rare for us to run into that situation," he said.

Strait's own shift had been scheduled to end at 6 a.m., but he ended up working for hours after his shift's usual endpoint, as part of the police department's collective effort to gather as much evidence and chase as many leads as possible in the hours immediately following the murder.

"You get some sleep, go back to work and do it all over again," Strait said of the typical officer's attitude at the time.

Strait realized that the "banging" that neighbors had heard had in fact been the sounds of gunfire. Gatto, who had been a drug dealer, was targeted for the large amount of cocaine and cash inside his home.

Strait credited then-Det. Tony Cereghino, who was actively involved in the investigation for seven years, for the successful conclusion of the case that resulted in 30 years of federal prison for Keandre Dshawn LaMarcus Brown. Strait became police chief in 2019 and promoted Cereghino to police captain last year.

Strait, who is planning to retire effective April 5, said that Cereghino, along with federal partners, built an almost perfect case against Brown, despite the bleak scene that police found in 2016. Investigators found an early break in their case when Portland police found a vehicle at the scene of a crash that matched the description of a suspect vehicle which had fled the Milwaukie murder scene.

Cereghino doggedly linked Brown with a crime spree that began only months after he was released from a five-year prison term. Prior to murdering Gatto, Brown had stolen controlled substances, pills, cash, wallets, credit cards and phones from a deli and nearby pharmacies. In the month after the murder, Brown robbed a Plaid Pantry on Northeast Sandy Boulevard and a Red Roof Inn on 82nd Avenue.

“Gun violence continues to be one of the greatest public safety threats in our community,” said Steven T. Mygrant, chief of the Oregon narcotics and criminal enterprises unit of the United States Attorney’s Office. “Keandre Brown and his accomplices’ string of armed robberies across the Portland area placed many innocent community members at significant risk.”

Strait thanked the investigation efforts of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force that identifies, disrupts and dismantles the highest-level drug traffickers, money launderers, gangs and transnational criminal organizations. This case was investigated by the FBI and Milwaukie Police Department with assistance from the Portland Police Bureau, Oregon State Police Crime Lab, Clackamas County District Attorney’s Office and Vancouver Police Department.

“In the years that have followed, investigators from Milwaukie Police, the FBI and the U.S. Attorney’s Office have worked tirelessly on what would become one of the most exhaustive investigations and prosecutions our region has seen in the last decade. Our criminal justice system has worked diligently and effectively to bring justice for this victim, his family and the entire Milwaukie community,” Strait said.

If offered the opportunity to change anything, Strait said he still wouldn’t have taken any time off for a mental health break following the murder. While he acknowledged that it was difficult to mentally process the murder’s bloody aftermath, he said it probably would have been hard as well to isolate from his co-workers who went through the same incident.

“What we have to factor in is that part of what keeps officers healthy is that regular contact with their support system,” Strait said. “As an agency, we have to be very intentional to make sure that we’re checking on people through the peer-support system.”