



PAINTIN' THE TOWN—
The 114 Pct., the United States Marine Corps and a community-based organization were founding members of a program aimed at combatting graffiti in Astoria, Queens. Pictured (l to r) P.O. Joseph Lisa Jr. and his C.O., Capt. Ryan Thomas (114 Pct.), Judge Joseph Lisa, Senator George Onorato, Staff Sgt. Chris Carr (U.S.M.C.), District Leader Gloria Aloise, Councilman Peter Vallone, Assemblyman Dennis Butler, Andy Bellini (former Marine), Major Greg Penczak (U.S.M.C.), Antonio Meloni (Second Chance/Astoria Community Anti-Crime Programs), and Peter Figetakis (photographer).

NYPD or the Marine Corps. It can be performed by the Boy Scouts, P.A.L., a church or religious organization or any concerned citizens' group."

"Mr. Meloni's knowledge and expertise helped us show Astoria and the whole city, for that matter, that as participants of Operation Gung-Ho, we care," Officer Lisa beamed. "Our work was based on dedication, commitment and, most importantly, teamwork!" J.H.

Body Of Evidence

A typical murder investigation begins with the discovery of a body and, in most cases, continues along a prescribed course until the person responsible is identified and arrested. Not so in the case of Eric Cruz. In the case of Eric Cruz, the investigation began when the person responsible was identified two years after the murder, and three months before the body was found. A street punk, picked up on a warrant by the 72 Precinct RIP Unit, said he knew of a shooting that had taken place two years before. He didn't know the full name of the victim, he didn't witness the crime, couldn't give the exact location of the body—but, he did know who did it.

After hearing this, Sergeant Frank Whelan of the RIP Unit called in Detective Kenny Fung and his partner Detective Mike Zarrilli of the 72 Squad who listened to the informer's story. In April 1991, an unidentified male had been shot by Steven Medina, a local crack head, at 926 47th Street; he was then hidden in a stolen car and dumped in the

water near 43rd Street. The detectives conducted an extensive interview and concluded the informer was probably telling the truth.

A review of missing persons' reports for the time of the alleged homicide met with negative results. Even though there was no identified victim, and the trail was two years old, the detectives started to build their case. A difficult job, but with assistance from some other talented members of the service, Detectives Zarrilli and Fung launched their investigation. A street informer said that on about April 12, 1991, Steven Medina admitted he had killed someone and ordered him to dispose of the murder weapon, a .357 Magnum. Seeing an opportunity to make a few dollars, he instead sold the gun. The detectives were able to find the weapon and confiscated it as evidence. Now they had the weapon and the name of the shooter, but still no victim.

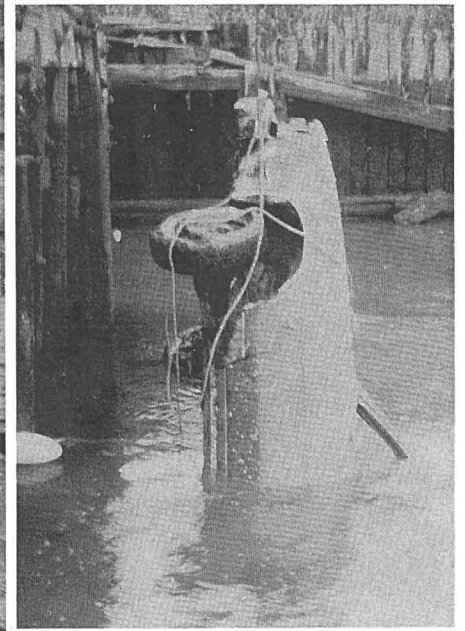
An examination of complaint reports revealed that a 1985 Olds had been stolen in April 1991. While the detectives followed leads and verified information, the SCUBA Unit was making dives in the New York Bay near 43rd Street searching for the car. It was the biggest search operation ever conducted, yielding 24 vehicles; unfortunately, not an '85 Olds. In the meantime, the search for the identity of the victim continued. Sergeant Whelan and Police Officers James Gaynor and Ed Ruer gave invaluable assistance canvassing the area for information.

Hitting the pavement and doing some good old-fashioned police work

paid off. Neighborhood residents told the RIP officers that there was a kid named Eric Cruz who was said to have fled to Colorado two years before. They were told his mother was now living on 50th Street.

While being interviewed by Detectives Fung and Zarrilli, Mrs. Cruz explained that she had not seen her son, Eric, since April 12, 1991. He was 18 at the time, and on that night had called to ask permission to stay out past his usual curfew. Mrs. Cruz became alarmed when her only son failed to come home. Several days later, she was told by people in the neighborhood that someone was "after" Eric and he had gone to Colorado to hide-out. What she didn't know was that Steven Medina spread that story as a ruse. A close-knit family, Eric's mother and two sisters prayed each day for his safe return. The detectives couldn't be sure that Eric was the victim in their homicide investigation, but "just to give this woman peace of mind, we wanted to find the truth," said Det. Zarrilli.

Their painstaking investigation revealed the names of others who either witnessed or knew of the shooting. Two were in prison, one was dead; the fourth one was on the street and quickly picked up for questioning. The witness told the detectives he had stolen a 1985 Olds Delta for Steven Medina in April 1991. Another individual who was found confessed that he drove the car for Medina—with a body wrapped in a red carpet in the back seat—to the bay and dumped it in the water. The location described by the driver was a short distance from where Scuba had



DEDICATION PAYS OFF—Detectives Kenny Fung and Michael Zarrilli of the 72 Squad spent months searching for the victim of a homicide. Their dedication and perseverance paid off when the body of Eric Cruz was found inside a 1985 Olds recovered from New York Bay.

made their earlier dives. “The Scuba Unit was great,” said Det. Fung. “But, after 100 dives, they were questioning our sanity,” recalled Det. Zarrilli. “We knew there was a body in the water, we just had to make them believe it as well.”

The case against Steven Medina was getting stronger. For three months, news that the cops were investigating a murder circulated in the neighborhood. Steven Medina stayed in the neighborhood, but in mid-September he showed signs that he might run. Trying to convince a skeptical ADA that you want to arrest a person for murder—without a body—takes some persuasive talking and very good case work.

Their patience and diligence paid off when the case was successfully presented to an ADA. Medina was arrested on September 16, 1993. On the morning of Sept. 17, 1993, at 44th Street and the New York Bay, Scuba divers discovered a 1985 Olds. In the car, wrapped in a red carpet, were the remains of Eric Cruz. Also found in the carpet was a .38 round fired from the .357 previously recovered.

After three months of intense investigation and the arrest of Medina, there was still more to do. Wanting to make their case as strong as possible, Detectives Fung and Zarrilli drove 700 miles in one day to interview the two alleged eyewitnesses who were at the Great Meadow and Mohawk Correctional Facilities. “It was obvious that the people involved were very afraid of Steven Medina,” Det. Fung said. “It seemed to be a relief that they could finally tell the truth about what happened.” One of the witnesses broke down in tears after telling the story of the murder. Steven Medina had cold-bloodedly shot Eric once in the chest after a minor verbal disagreement.

During a homicide investigation, detectives often get to know a victim’s family and, as in this case, empathize with a parent over the loss of a child. “It wasn’t easy telling Mrs. Cruz about her son,” said Det. Fung. But, as Det. Zarrilli commented, “at least now she knows the truth.” Eric’s family can at least visit his grave and their years of wondering are at an

end. As a result of their commitment to justice and steadfast search for the truth, the detectives and officers of the 72 Squad and RIP Unit, with the help of members of the Scuba Unit, brought a murderer to justice (Medina was later indicted), and possibly even more importantly, they gave a mother peace of mind. J.L.

Cash & Carry

It was the evening of September 27, 1993 and it was business as usual for Heshie Hochman and forty other employees of the Fairway Supermarket, located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The layer of day-old sawdust had been swept up off the floor, empty shelves were restocked with an assortment of canned goods and sparse produce counters were brought back to life with colorful fruits and vegetables. Things were normal until armed bandits stormed in and announced a robbery.

Everyone was forced to the rear of the store and ordered to “kiss the ground!” Meanwhile, a “lookout” stationed himself next to the front door to ensure his cohorts had an opportunity to do some “uninterrupted shopping.” The foul-mouthed perps held guns to Mr. Hochman’s head and