

 St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Officer's suicide fits familiar pattern

BY JESSE BOGAN • jbogan@post-dispatch.com and JOEL CURRIER • jeurrier@post-dispatch.com | Posted: Sunday, February 20, 2011 12:15 am

ST. LOUIS • City police Sgt. William Vize's living room offers a glimpse of how he looked at his life before deciding to end it two months ago.

Foremost an artist, Vize decorated the tall walls with a host of self-portraits. In one, Vize is a clown with a red smile. In another, he's a knight, competing against himself in a game of chess. A piece with a dramatic sweep illustrates him deciding to become a police officer amid the dark influences of society.

In the corner of the room, a replica of a skull stares back from the top of his computer screen. Over the years, he did hundreds of composite sketches of crime suspects for the police department.

There's a cut-out newspaper photo nearby of Vize walking side by side with then-U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, a time when he was hailed as a symbol of community policing.

His career path wound up taking a drastic turn. Frustrated with bosses and under department scrutiny at the end, Vize became a face of the silent killer of cops.

On duty early Dec. 18, officials said, he put his service pistol to his head and shot himself in an overgrown lot near the Mississippi River.

He was 45 and just three years from receiving a pension. He left behind a wife, two teenage boys, his parents and a brother.

Carolyn Vize, his wife of 20 years, said she doesn't believe it was a suicide. She isn't satisfied with the investigation and wishes now she had listened to his stories more closely.

"Bill talked so much," she said. "Every day, he came home and would go on and on about work. I wish I'd paid better attention or written it down. I never thought we'd need that information.

"His death was a complete and total shock to us," she said.

For one thing, he didn't leave a note. Family said he was so communicative that he would have left behind a book. And he knew from his work the kind of stress suicide puts on children.

But his case bears the markings that psychologists say are key indicators of being at a higher risk for suicide.

He was a white male between 45 and 54. He had easy access to a gun and was trained to use it. He felt unneeded. (Police had stopped using his artistic skills.) He was frustrated. (He had worn co-workers thin lambasting the department for minimizing crime statistics.)

And there was a fresh allegation that he sexually assaulted someone while on duty.

"I can understand the wife trying to make sense of something, and sometimes it's very difficult, but there is absolutely nothing in the investigation that indicates anything other than suicide," St. Louis Police Chief Dan Isom said in an interview Wednesday.

Vize was buried quietly, without a formal police motorcade or honor guard.

"It makes it difficult because here's an officer who has committed suicide but at the same time there were some very serious allegations that were being investigated prior to his death," Isom said. "We've got to recognize the sensitivity of disparaging an officer with allegations that have not yet been substantiated and causing undue stress to his family."

Isom wasn't sure how many officers have committed suicide in his department, but he said the rates are high among police officers compared to most other professions.

"This is an extremely stressful job and along with that creates some mental illness problems," he said.

Six weeks after Vize pulled the trigger, another local officer did the same.

Sgt. Michael J. Amrein, 47, a 21-year veteran of the St. Louis County Police Department, shot himself in his patrol car about noon Jan. 29 in the parking lot of Rockwood Summit High School in Fenton.

It was a surprise to his department, officials said. Among his other accolades, he was the 2006 winner of the St. Louis Area Police Chiefs Association's Medal of Valor.

'FERTILE ARENA FOR SUICIDE'

Finding accurate data on police suicides is difficult because state or federal agencies don't track them. According to a study published in the International Journal of Emergency Mental Health, 141 U.S. officers committed suicide in 2008, three times the number who were considered homicide victims that year.

Meanwhile, the National Police Suicide Foundation estimates the total at more than 400 a year, counting retired officers and figures from Native American police forces.

Researchers continue to debate yearly estimates but generally agree that more police kill themselves than are killed by others, which is the same for the general population.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates the suicide rate for the general population is 11.5 for every 100,000 people, with 35,000 reported each year. A study at Radford University in Virginia estimated the suicide rate for police is 50 percent higher.

"The job is a fertile arena for suicide," said John Violanti, a professor at State University of New York in Buffalo. "They have a gun, and there's exposure to trauma."

Police suicide is also linked to marital problems, drug and alcohol abuse, work-related stress, guilt for not saving someone, legal problems and loss of respect by peers.

"One of the worst things you can do is have somebody ostracized because police work is a very peer-oriented occupation," said Herb Nieburg, associate professor of law and justice and policy studies at Mitchell College in New London, Conn.

Police can be their own worst critics. So deeply invested in their careers, they often react strongly when their image is threatened, Laurence Miller, a police psychologist in Boca Raton, Fla., wrote in a 2005 study.

When police find themselves under criminal investigation, they "may fear the loss of status and identity of the police role, and for some overly emotionally invested officers, this may be too much to bear."

Many experts agree that police departments should do more to encourage officers to seek yearly mental health counseling.

Among the biggest obstacles, said Sgt. Clarence Hines, who heads a team that supports city officers involved in traumatic on-the-job encounters, is persuading officers to "step from behind the blue wall" and seek help when they need it.

"They're worried about being judged, worried about perception and to some extent they may be worried about repercussions," he said.

ABOUT-FACE

A photograph of Vize in uniform was chosen for the cover of the police department's 1994 annual report.

A year later, he was a symbol of President Bill Clinton's initiative to put 100,000 foot patrol officers on the streets. Vize gave Reno and then-House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-St. Louis, a walking tour of his beat at the time in Dogtown.

In front of cameras that day, Vize told Reno how he had gathered enough information to return a missing power saw to its owner. Walking instead of driving, he said, earned him better trust. Residents came out of their homes to tell the entourage his presence made them feel safer.

Without the basic police work like Vize was doing, Reno said, "the whole standard of society breaks down."

Vize was on a roll. Two years later he was named officer of the year of a district in north St. Louis.

But by 2010, Vize's career was cooling.

He was sent home 10 minutes into his shift for arguing or fighting with a peer, family said. He also clashed with commanders.

Vize was frustrated with the department's revamped method of counting crimes to lower statistics.

In a Post-Dispatch interview in November about his sketch work, Vize criticized department brass for staging "dog and pony" shows based on crime statistics, trends and new investigative approaches that he thought didn't really reduce crime.

He specifically criticized the formation of a district task force designed to reduce residential burglaries, an idea he says was done in one of the despised weekly meetings.

"If you have one bright idea on how to prevent a residential burglary, you let me know," he said.

Last year, the Post-Dispatch disclosed that the city had begun counting multiple property crimes that happen close together as one incident, even when there are multiple victims, under the FBI report guidelines' "time and place" rule.

Vize said he thought it masked a bleak picture of crime in St. Louis. As a sergeant, he carried authority to review incident reports. When he saw burglary reports changed further up the line to a lesser offense, Vize was furious, his family said. A colleague at work said Vize even tried to change the charges back to burglaries, apparently to no avail.

Soon after, Vize was moved to the overnight shift.

In November, the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University hired him to draw forensic sketches from people's recollections of their first loves. He told a reporter then that he thought the police department undervalued his skills as an artist.

He also spoke of how 17 years in law enforcement changed him.

"I went into being a police officer for all the right reasons," he said. "I wanted to change the world."

Though he said he'd had some victories, "probably, in reality, the world has changed me a little bit more."

Vize did 14 sketches during his gig at Kemper. He had an appointment to do one more on Dec. 18, the day he died.

FINDING SGT. VIZE

On early morning duty the weekend before his death, Vize crossed paths with a distressed woman and gave her a ride home. Several hours later, she made a formal complaint to the department, alleging sexual assault.

Internal affairs officers arrived at his doorstep the next day, a Sunday, asking him to grab his duty belt and come downtown. His wife said he stalled, trying to contact an attorney, but eventually complied.

As part of their inquiry, internal affairs detectives seized Vize's handcuffs, according to police records. Later that night, he went back to work. It went poorly.

"It seemed that everyone knew more than he did," said Carolyn Vize. "Other officers said they had heard he was suicidal."

They kept asking him if the allegations were true, she said. Vize told his wife they weren't.

Throughout the week, officers kept calling him, even some he didn't know well.

Before heading out to his 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift Dec. 17, Vize set his alarm clock for 1 p.m. the next day, to be sure he would be up for the last sketch appointment. He and his wife had been discussing plans to attend a Christmas party that a lieutenant was hosting.

Vize briefly chatted with dispatchers by radio. By 3 a.m. he didn't answer, and a search that included a police helicopter was launched. His locked patrol car was found at the end of Angelica Street, near the river. He turned up nearby, at a former industrial site now littered with fallen trees and cinder blocks.

The isolated area is surrounded by railroad tracks. Interstate 70 traffic hums in the distance. On a recent day, a long strand of yellow police tape lay half-buried in ice and snow.

"I wish he would have called me," said a sergeant who knew Vize well. "I am still mad at him."

THROWING PUNCHES

The BackStoppers is a charity in St. Louis that provides financial help to the families of public safety workers killed in the line of duty. The annual Guns 'N Hoses boxing showdown between police and firefighters is its major fundraiser.

Vize, 5-foot-7, 150 pounds and at the top of his game, trained for months for the 1997 event. The Kiel Center downtown pulsed with more than 10,000 spectators when Vize lined up in the opposite corner from Danny Picarella, a firefighter from Glen Carbon.

"He came out like a bull," recalled Picarella, now 43, who described the bout in terms of a back-alley fight. Picarella tripped a few times in the first round, and Vize held his own. But the match was reported as the comeback of the night, with Vize losing in a 5-0 decision.

"He kind of tired himself from throwing punches," Picarella said.

Vize gave his all for the BackStoppers that night, but by its rules the organization cannot backstop his wife and children. Families left behind by line-of-duty deaths qualify, explained Ron Battelle, a former St. Louis County police chief who is now the BackStoppers' director. Families of those who commit suicide don't.

"They realize what our mission is," Battelle said. "Certainly there are inquiries," he noted, adding, "they understand."

A tall trophy from the Guns 'N Hoses fight rests on top of a bookshelf in the Vize family living room. It's above a row of Cub Scout "Pinewood Derby" cars - one that looks like a patrol car - a few chess boards and dozens of miniature knights that Vize used as models for his paintings.

His family isn't sure what will become of the room - particularly the corner where he often sat at the computer - and how they will manage in a house so dominated by his personality. His paintings are scattered all over. A collage of composite sketches bearing his signature lines the stairwell.

"My boys and I are pretty quiet people, and he wasn't," said his widow. "It's just been very different in the house since he left."