

Star-Telegram

Fort Worth detective is officer of the year for his cold-case work

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FORT WORTH -- Detective Jose Hernandez had six years under his belt as a homicide investigator when he was chosen to join the cold-case unit, investigating the unsolved killings of years past.

"Television shows often portray cold cases as easily solved or prosecuted. That's not the case," said Hernandez, a 22-year veteran of the department. "People's memories fade as time goes by, and often witnesses and suspects are no longer living."

Hernandez's determination and success in tackling those challenges, officials say, led to his being recognized as the Police Department's officer of the year for 2009. Hernandez, 47, got the award last week at a dinner hosted by the Fort Worth Police Officers' Award Foundation.

Homicide Sgt. J.D. Thornton, who nominated Hernandez, described him as an "extraordinary" detective.

"He was very meticulous and organized, and his efforts produced results on cases that had been investigated by a number of other detectives throughout the years," Thornton said. "He is a determined investigator, yet was very sensitive and caring when it came to interacting with families of murder victims."

Early life

Hernandez was 4 when his family left Havana in 1967 as part of the "freedom flights" that would ultimately carry thousands of Cubans seeking political refuge to the United States.



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Hernandez "is a true behind-the-scenes hero," a police official said.

His family settled in Miami, which Hernandez would call home for about 20 years.

"Of course we were fortunate to live in this country," Hernandez said.

In 1983, he joined the Air Force. For four years he worked as a police officer at Dyess Air Force Base in Abilene, conducting patrols and working as a desk sergeant responsible for handling calls and other duties.

The assignment gave Hernandez a taste of law enforcement, and in late 1987, hearing that Fort Worth police were hiring, he applied.

Five years later, Hernandez was promoted to detective. In the years that followed, he worked in the south division criminal investigation and major case units. In 2002, he was transferred to homicide.

"I liked it because of the challenge, the intensity of the work. And at the same time, it was very rewarding to provide resolution for the families of the victims," Hernandez said.

In nominating Hernandez, Thornton described him as an "exceptional investigator" whose arrest and clearance rate on murder cases was consistently at or near the top of his unit.

Because of his work, Hernandez was chosen in 2008 to fill a position in the cold-case unit, composed at that time of only one other officer, Detective Manny Reyes.

Cold-case success

In his position, funded by a federal grant aimed at solving cold cases through DNA, Hernandez reviewed 139 cases dating to 1966, creating extensive files and a computer database to track details and physical evidence in each.

Through weekly meetings with crime lab personnel, he helped identify about 40 cases that needed further evidence processing.

His work helped lead to several arrests. Among those cases were the brutal slaying of a 44-year-old woman found dead in a field by churchgoers leaving a Sunday service in 2002, and the vicious attack and fatal stabbing in 1997 of a lab technician.

Another case Hernandez helped solve -- the 1986 slaying of a mother of two who had been bound with duct tape and shot in the head while her children played elsewhere in the house -- involved not DNA but latent fingerprints.

Prints found on the tape had been submitted to state and national databases over the years, but there had been no matches. Because of inherent problems with the system, Hernandez hand-delivered the prints to Austin to have them entered again, and a link was made to a Dallas real estate agent.

New assignment

In September, Hernandez began working in the special-investigation unit. Created by Police Chief Jeff Halstead, it investigates criminal complaints against department employees and conducts efficiency audits on the entire department.

"Jose represents the best of the best in all who have pledged to defend the defenseless," said Lt. Paul Henderson, chief of staff. "Whether it is solving a cold-case murder or defending the integrity of the Police Department in his new role as a special investigator, Detective Hernandez is a true behind-the-scenes hero."

Hernandez said being named officer of the year was a surprise.

"It's an honor to be recognized by my peers for the job I do," he said.

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Others Fort Worth police officers who were honored as outstanding in their area of assignment:

Capt. Billy Cordell, commander of the year

Sgt. Chad Plowman, supervisor of the year

Officer Jeff Cunningham, Dewayne Freeto rookie of the year

Officer Chris Munday, central field operations division

Officer Juan Aguilar, north field operations division

Detective Keith Savoy, west field operations division

Officer Kevin Hernandez, south field operations division

Officer John Bright, east field operations division

Detective M.D. Green, criminal investigations division

Officer John Gottlob, special operations division

Officer Rocsana Ferren, specialized units

Reserve Lt. Bill Brown, reserve unit

Read more: <http://www.star-telegram.com/2010/05/23/2210772/fort-worth-detective-is-officer.html#ixzz0oqxMGiDO>