

NEWS

Homicide cops told: Don't overlook little details

Something as simple as a cup of spilled sugar can break a homicide case.

Michael Goot | January 28, 2013



A Practical Homicide Investigation class was held for detectives at Mallozzi's in Rotterdam on Monday. Photographer: Stacey Lauren-Kennedy

Something as simple as a cup of spilled sugar can break a homicide case.

Vernon Geberth, a retired lieutenant commander with the New York City Police Department, told a group of 68 law enforcement officials about a city case in which three members of the Mafia were at a social club following a fatal shooting. Nobody was talking until police said they would be arrested.

Geberth said a detective noticed a bowl of sugar that was on the floor. That looked out of place. One of the men gave police a description of the shooter and the car. When police found the car, there was sugar all over the gas pedal that had apparently been spilled in the fracas. The suspected shooter got it on himself as well and transferred it to the car.

“Little things mean a lot,” Geberth said Monday at a homicide investigation class being held at Mallozzi’s in Rotterdam.

This was the first day of a three-day seminar attended by law enforcement officials from all over the state. Among the departments attending were Schenectady, Albany, Troy, Rochester, Syracuse and Binghamton.

Geberth is president of P.H.I. Investigative Consultants Inc. and author of homicide investigation textbooks.

Schenectady Assistant Police Chief Patrick Leguire said Geberth was brought in to teach the class so his detectives can be more effective and efficient in solving homicide cases.

Among the issues detectives run into in Schenectady are witnesses who won’t cooperate, according to Leguire. “Nobody wants to be a snitch,” he said.

People are afraid of retaliation if they are seen talking to police, he said.

Geberth acknowledged that sometimes it is difficult to get people to talk but said detectives should also do a thorough job of surveying the scene and finding potential witnesses.

“I’ve seen people canvass a whole building in five minutes. You know they’re not really canvassing,” he said.

People may initially be reluctant to talk or don’t believe they have any valuable information to contribute, which is wrong, according to Geberth.

“They may not even think they know something, but in the big picture — when you piece it altogether — they do,” he said.

He encouraged officers to get a variety of vantage points to solve a case. He recalled one instance where an officer climbed up on the roof and noticed that there were buildings across from where the crime occurred. People in the other buildings may have seen the suspects climbing down the fire escape and that opened up a whole new canvass for witnesses.

“Sometimes looking at a crime scene from a different direction, an aerial view, might prove fortuitous to you,” he said.

Geberth said homicide detectives have to be incredibly detailed in their notes. They should record the exact time they got the call, when they arrived on the scene, the number of police units, the exact address and which officers responded first.

“If the process was not right or something goes wrong, guess who gets blamed — the assigned detective,” he said.

There are so many points along the way where something can go wrong, according to Geberth. For example, one of the crime scene investigators could contaminate the scene. He recalled a 2010 New York City case where Natavia Lowery killed real estate agent Linda Stein.

Police had no doubt that Lowery was the suspect. However, a drop of one officer’s blood at the scene got mixed with a drop of the victim’s blood. That created a potential opening for the defense to argue that their client was not the right person.

Geberth said officials should not use the bathroom at the crime scene.

In another city case, an officer forgot to frisk a suspect who had an MP3 player on his person that was recording his interaction with police. When making the arrest, the officer had also forgotten to read the suspect his Miranda rights. The officer later perjured himself. He ended up losing his job and pension, according to Geberth.

Supervisors should distribute work equally among the investigators, according to Geberth. When he took over as a lieutenant in a Bronx precinct that had about 50 homicides per year, he learned that one of the three investigative teams was handling 70 percent of the cases.

However, he advised against rotating out personnel on cases unless the detectives are incompetent or have some other issue. He cited how there were mistakes made in the JonBenet Ramsey case as different detectives took over at different points.

Not every death is a homicide, of course. Geberth showed grisly crime scene and autopsy photographs and asked the officers to identify whether the person died from a homicide, suicide, accidentally or from natural causes. The officers were accurate, picking up clues such as the blood spatter, or whether the body was positioned in a certain way that indicated the person was seeking sexual pleasure.

Geberth peppered his talk with colorful language and some profanity, giving it a gritty feel. However, he cautioned that detectives have to be careful with what they say at a crime scene. He recalled the Las Vegas investigation into O.J. Simpson’s robbery to retrieve his sports memorabilia. One of Simpson’s accomplices had placed an audio recorder at the crime scene, which ran for hours afterward as the scene was being processed. Officers were referring to Simpson as a “scumbag,” “killer” and laughing, saying “if the glove don’t fit, you have to acquit.”

Those officers were called to testify in court to defend themselves, according to Geberth.

“All those funny hah hahs were not so funny anymore,” he said.