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Health - Physical and Mental Fitness Article

September 06, 2005

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Chaos of Katrina drives police officer to suicide

By CAIN BURDEAU
Associated Press Writer

NEW ORLEANS- Life wasn't supposed to end this way for Sgt. Paul Accardo: alone in chaos.

He wrote a note telling anyone who found him who to contact _ a fellow officer. He was precise, and thoughtful, to the end. Then he stuck a gun into his mouth and killed himself.

Accardo was one of two city cops who committed suicide last week as New Orleans descended into an abyss of death and destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. He was found in an unmarked patrol car on Saturday in a downtown parking lot.

His funeral was planned for Tuesday.

Back when life was normal and structured, Accardo served as one of the police department's chief spokesmen. He reported murders, hostage situations and rapes in measured words, his bespectacled face benign and familiar on the nightly news.

"Paul was a stellar guy. A perfectionist. Everything had to be just right," recalled Sgt. Joe Narcisse, who went to police academy with Accardo and worked with him in the public affairs office.

Uniform crisply pressed, office in order, everything just right on his desk. That was Accardo.

"I'm the jokester in the office. I'd move stuff on his desk and he didn't like that," said Capt. Marlon Defillo, Accardo's boss. "He was ready to call the crime lab to find out who messed with his desk."

Maybe, Defillo reckoned, he killed himself because he lost hope that order would ever be restored in the city.

A public information officer, the captain said, turns the senseless _ murder, rape, mayhem _ into something orderly for the public. "It's like dominoes scattered across a table and putting them in order."

But in New Orleans for the past week, the chaos seemed endless.

Like the rest of the department, Accardo worked long, difficult days _ sometimes 20 hours. He waded through the mass of flesh and stench in the Louisiana Superdome. He saw the dead in the streets.

Defillo remembered how bad Accardo felt when he was unable to help women stranded on the interstate and pleading for water and food. One woman said her baby had not had water in three days.

He even wanted to stop and help the animals lost amid the ruin of New Orleans, Defillo said.

Unable to stop the madness and hurt, Accardo sank into depression.

Narcisse remembered being on the telephone with him, complaining about the flooding when his old academy buddy cut him off mid-sentence: "Joe. Joe. I can't talk to you right now." He couldn't handle it anymore, Narcisse said.

"It was like you were having an awful conversation with someone who died in your family," he said.

Accardo _ who also lost his home in the flood waters _ looked like a zombie, like someone who hadn't slept in year, Defillo said. But so did all the others on the force. Some have failed to report for duty, while others have turned in their badges. Vacations and counseling were ordered for those who have remained.

But the captain said he never thought Accardo would kill himself.

"We kept telling him, 'There's going to be a brighter day, suck it up,'" Defillo said. "He couldn't shake it."



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