

'I will always be a detective'

Watsonville police chief marks 30 years in law enforcement



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Watsonville police chief Terry Medina honed his detective's interviewing skills while working in the DA's office.

Medina earned reputation as a tenacious cop

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WATSONVILLE

TERRY MEDINA HAS been fighting crime in Santa Cruz County for more than half his life.

He has been a sheriff's deputy, an inspector in the District Attorney's Office, chief of police in Watsonville.

Medina marks his 30th year in law enforcement this month.

With a detective's mind for fine detail, the 51-year-old Medina recalls first and last names of old witnesses and the street addresses of crime scenes long past.

His is a story entwined with some of the most notorious crimes in Santa Cruz County history.

"My career followed big murder cases," remembered Medina, who has been the Watsonville chief since 1989.

As a detective in the Sheriff's Office, Medina worked to put away mass murderer Edmund Kemper, who was convicted in 1973 of murdering eight Santa Cruz women, including his mother, her best friend and six college students.

Medina was the primary detective in the case of Herbert Mullin, who killed 13 people in 1972 and 1973.

He conducted interviews that eventually connected the many killings. He even guarded some of the victims' bodies one long night in the woods.

Several of Mullin's victims were found one afternoon in Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park. Authorities decided it was too late in the day to take out the bodies so Medina and another deputy, Brad Arbsland, stayed through the night to make sure nothing disturbed the scene, remembered county Supervisor Ray Belgard, then chief inspector in the District Attorney's Office.

"He was tenacious," Belgard said.

No one knew at the time if there was another murderer on the loose and about to return. Medina and Arbsland debated during the evening whether they should be sitting in the lights, where they would be easy targets, or laying low in the dark.

Medina's work on these notorious cases and other homicides led him to serve as a consultant for a Time-Life Books series on mass murderers.

He is the detective who solved the murder case of Joyce Coulter, a 27-year-old Capitola woman, in 1975.

Medina was in a patrol car when he heard that someone had been arrested for a disturbance. There was mention that the person might have information about a girl.

Perhaps it was detective's instinct, but a feeling came over Medina that he should go to the jail and talk to the witness. From that

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interview, he was able to break the case that saw Vincent Regan and Orrin "Buzz" Carr convicted of the murder. Carr was also convicted of the murder of Aptos musician Robert Karnon.

"I think I will always be a detective," said Medina, who admits he still finds crime scenes fascinating and loves good police work.

Medina's interest in law enforcement developed after graduating from Santa Cruz High School. He was taking business courses at Cabrillo College and planned to join his father in real estate.

"It only took me a year to figure out I didn't like it very much," he said.

One day on campus, Medina bumped into Gene Wright, who was in charge of the police science program. Wright told him to just drop in on one of the classes to see how he liked it.

"I knew after 15 minutes this was going to be what I wanted to do for the rest of my life," Medina said.

As a 20-year-old, he was named the college's outstanding police science student.

He then served as an intern in the District Attorney's Office.

Affable and direct, Medina cut his teeth in this job. A strong interviewer, who has walked away with many confessions, he honed his interviewing skills in the DA's office, where he began in the child support division, talking to women about paternity and men about responsibility.

A year later in 1968, he was hired by the Sheriff's Office. In two years, he was a detective in the

department, working the county's biggest murder cases.

Medina returned to the District Attorney's Office in 1979 at the urging of Marj Von Beroldingan, a local news reporter who had covered many of the major crime stories.

"She thought it was in my best interest to apply back to the DA," he said.

From there, Medina went to the Watsonville Police Department in 1982 as a captain. He has been chief of police since 1989 when he was selected from a field of 45 candidates.

He was being groomed for the job by Belgard, who was police chief at the time, remembered Mayor Dennis Osmer.

During a budget hearing, Osmer questioned why the police force needed a new siren for a van. Belgard turned the microphone around to Medina.

"In a low voice, Medina said, 'Got stolen,'" Osmer remembered.

Medina was learning to field difficult administrative tasks even before he took over the department, he said.

He has advocated getting police officers out of their cars and into the neighborhoods.

When people call the chief, they get a call back, Osmer said.

"I'm driven in my own way," Medina said. "My style is to be a leader and not a manager. I want to always be in the forefront of technology and put the kind of tools and equipment in the officers' hands to do more with less, bring us closer to people we police."

When one of his officers was fired and prosecuted for shaking down drunks for money about five years ago, it was said that Medina looked sad as he announced the cop's downfall.

"Disappointed is a better word," he answered.

Many thought that Medina would eventually make a run for county sheriff, but he has passed. It has been a good fit for him in Watsonville.

Born and raised in Santa Cruz, he has found a connection with the blue-collar town 20 miles south of his birthplace.

If someone makes a mistake or a criminal gets caught, they accept responsibility in Watsonville, Medina said.

As police chief, his job is more administrator than gumshoe these days, overseeing a \$6 million budget and 76 employees.

He said his job is to create an environment for all his employees to succeed. He is serious about giving his force the best crime-fighting equipment.

Due largely to Medina's aggressiveness in getting good tools, the police department was the first in the county to have computerized records, computer-aided dispatch and a photo-imaging system that ties suspects' photos to background information, said retired police Capt. Chuck Carter, the chief's assistant for several years.

Medina has also become part of the community. He knows everyone, and everyone knows Medina.

He has two grown sons and a 7-year-old son. He is married to Watsonville dentist Myrna Jose Medina.

He has let city employees toss pies at him after a record effort in raising money for charity and was a celebrity waiter at a recent event for the Pajaro Valley chapter of the American Diabetes Association.

He serves on 16 boards and commissions.

"I do feel so much a part of the community," he said. "Watsonville is very diverse ethnically, but it has a common value system — a work ethic."