



St. Lucie County Sheriff's Detective
Brian Hester
Wins 2006 Deputy Sheriff of the Year

By Julie S. Bettinger

One of the traditional highlights of the Florida Sheriffs Association Summer Conference is meeting The Deputy Sheriff of the Year winner.

Past winners have been recognized for everything from wrestling victims away from dangerous criminals to surviving a shootout and bringing the culprits to justice.

The men and women who have received this prestigious, statewide award are often recognized for an outstanding act related to one particular incident – frequently on the frontline. In the case of this year's winner, it was very much behind-the-scenes work that made the frontline operations go more smoothly.

What captured our award committee's attention was an investigation that lasted three months and resulted in the

dismantling of a powerful and dangerous street gang. This special operation targeted and successfully took down the leaders of a group responsible for several homicides, numerous shootings, robberies and a significant level of narcotic trafficking.

During the investigation, the Sheriff's Office had acquired enough evidence to prove that in just 90 days, this group and its supplier had moved more 550 pounds – that's one-quarter ton – of powder and crack cocaine through a county of about 300,000 people.

Hindered by henchmen

As with many investigations, "Operation Unlucky 13" was borne out of a need for a comprehensive solution to a growing problem. Officers and investigators at every level – federal, state and local – had suffered for years trying to fight illegal drug activity

St. Lucie County Sheriff Ken Mascara (left) congratulates his Detective, 2006 Deputy Sheriff of the Year Brian Hester, pictured with his wife Brittany.

and investigate serious crimes, including homicides, shootings and robberies in northern Ft. Pierce. But all cases were hindered by the presence of a powerful organization called the 13th Street Gang.

The gang members were fighting with others over the usual things – turf, drugs and girlfriends – and creating a culture of fear in the community. But the tactics they used to intimidate witnesses and victims – including violence, threats and even murder – were hindering all efforts by law enforcement to investigate or prosecute cases in that area.

By all accounts, it was getting worse. The St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office was seeing a tremendous increase in the amount of cocaine pouring into the

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area and they knew the 13th Street Gang was largely responsible.

Detective Brian Hester and other members of St. Lucie County's Special Investigations Unit started looking for ways to attack the organization and dismantle it. They knew if they could get the top tier – the leadership and second or third levels – they had a better chance of cutting off the flow of drugs.

In February of last year, Detective Hester proposed a plan that would combine the resources of the Sheriff's Office with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the State Attorney's Office, the Ft. Pierce Police Department, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the U.S. Attorney's Office. His idea was to conduct a wire intercept of the cellular telephones of the key members of the group and target their ongoing drug organization. This would allow investigators to track the organization's daily routines, determine their financial abilities and better understand their operation.

Now, the idea of cell phone wiretaps may sound easy, but anyone in law enforcement will tell you it's tricky business.

Having the technology to allow the wiretaps is the first challenge, but Detective Hester knew the technology existed through FDLE. Next, there had to be enough probable cause to justify the wiretaps.

Under Detective Hester's direction, the combined agencies spent countless hours researching and conducting surveillance and interviews to gain enough probable cause to lead to the final draft of the wiretaps. The interviews were especially difficult to come by, since anyone with knowledge of the

gang's activities was subject to their threats.

Through diligent efforts, though, they managed to prove their case and by March, investigators were monitoring eight cellular phone lines.

A code word for...?

Here's where they met their next series of challenges. Gathering intelligence through faceless conversations between callers can be very confusing. In order to decipher the gang lingo and various accents, the investigators had to learn a new culture through eavesdropping. Once deciphered, this information had to be organized in a way that would win search warrants and allow law enforcement to make arrests with charges that would stick, based on the evidence they'd gathered. There was no room for error in any of the collection methods used.

Through their investigation, what detectives found was a business model that consisted of a supplier, 34-year-old Derrick Cooper, purchasing crack and powder cocaine for distribution through the 13th Street Gang. Gang leader, 27-year-old Johnny Daniels, recruited members to be street-level dealers by enticing them with the lure of expensive cars, boats and other luxuries, calling it the "sweet success of their entrepreneurship."

As St. Lucie County Sheriff Ken Mascara pointed out later, it was more like "the fruit of the poison vine."

With all the intelligence gathered, Detective Hester and his team determined that over a three-month period, the 13th Street Gang was responsible for distributing 150 kilos, approximately 330 pounds, of powder and crack cocaine in Ft. Pierce, alone – a town of about 40,000 people. Investigators also discovered several other organized groups that were responsible for selling an additional 100 kilos, or 220 pounds, throughout the county during the same time period.

It was estimated that the drug

ring supplied \$4.5 million worth of cocaine each month to customers in St. Lucie County.

By early June, thanks to the investigators' efforts, the team had executed 14 search warrants and confiscated nine firearms, nearly \$200,000 in cash, seven vehicles valued at about \$300,000 and large amounts of cocaine. Thirty-seven individuals were arrested, including Johnny Daniels, the head of the 13th Street Gang, and primary trafficker Derrick Cooper, the supplier.

Doing the time

The operation successfully achieved its goal of taking down the leadership. Federal indictments alone resulted in two men serving life sentences, four serving 27 years each and six serving 10 years or more.

According to the nomination form submitted on his behalf, as the lead, Detective Brian Hester had the most demanding and difficult job any investigator can take on. Besides initiating the plan, he monitored all situations, worked a variety of hours and shifts and produced volumes of paperwork. He organized transcriptions, surveillance logs and – eventually – the indictments. Throughout the three-month operation, Detective Hester's investigative and organizational skills were exceptional.

Because of the sheer volume of crime that this one gang was responsible for, the Ft. Pierce Police Department credited the operation, and other follow-up efforts by the Sheriff's Office, with significantly decreasing crime in their community.

And one year later, this one investigation continues to bear fruit: information gathered from the operation has led to obtaining more evidence that is supplementing ongoing investigations that had become stagnant due to the fear of retaliation from 13th Street Gang members. These crimes include previously unsolved robberies and homicides.

While many agencies and their personnel assisted in the

investigation, all those associated with the case agree that Detective Brian Hester was the driving force from the beginning through the end. His work ethic, concern, drive and teamwork are credited with taking down the leadership,

second-and third-level people and effectively destroying the violent 13th Street Gang.

For this reason, the Florida Sheriffs have selected Detective Brian Hester as their 2006 Deputy Sheriff of the Year and awarded

him a handsome plaque and a check for \$1,000.

Our congratulations to Detective Hester for his fine work and the example he set for future large-scale operations.

Polk County Deputy Sheriff Douglas Speirs Named Runner-Up

The Florida Sheriffs wanted to also recognize Polk County Sheriff's Deputy Douglas Speirs, who was involved in an incident that was nationally televised and ended in the tragic death of his fellow deputy and canine partner.

While performing what seemed to be a routine traffic stop, Deputy Douglas Speirs was handed a Florida Identification Card by a driver who identified himself as Edwardo Ramclain. When the driver asked if he was going to be arrested for not having a valid license, Deputy Speirs said he did not know at that point.

The driver ran from the scene into a densely wooded area. Numerous patrol units set up a perimeter to contain the suspect, while Deputy Speirs, Deputy Matt Williams and his canine partner, DiOGi, tracked the man. Within seven minutes, they located the suspect, who began shooting. All three officers were hit – Deputy Williams and his devoted canine partner, DiOGi fatally. Deputy Speirs managed to limp, then crawl through the woods and water to seek help. While being treated for a gunshot wound to his leg, he provided enough details on the suspect for them to positively identify him as Angilo Freeland, not Ramclain. The suspect was located the following day during a massive search of the wooded area and died in a shootout with officers.

The Florida Sheriffs have named Polk County Deputy



Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd congratulates Deputy Doug Speirs, FSA's 2006 Deputy Sheriff of the Year finalist. Deputy Speirs was recognized for his actions related to a traffic stop that included a lengthy manhunt and ended in the tragic death of fellow Deputy Matt Williams and his K-9 partner DiOGi.

Douglas Speirs Runner-Up for the 2006 Deputy Sheriff of the Year for his brave actions in the face of imminent danger, overcoming physical pain to assist in the

successful identification of the suspect, and preventing further loss of life of innocent victims.

Congratulations, Deputy Speirs.

Following the Sept. 28, 2006 shooting of Polk County Deputy Matt Williams and his K-9 partner DiOGi, a former K-9 Officer donated two of her AKC-certified German Shepherd puppies to be raffled off to raise money for Deputy Williams' family. The agency raised thousands of dollars. At right, one of the puppies meets his superior, K-9 Riso. Thanks to all who supported this worthy cause.

