

'Sgt. Vick was the light in the darkness for many'

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TwinCities.com-Pioneer Press

Article Last Updated:04/21/2007 03:14:16 AM CDT

As an officer of the court I would hope that all members of the legal profession would live by the oath "we promise to tell the truth and nothing but the truth." Whether this oath was violated by an act of commission or omission in last Sunday's op-ed piece by Robin Magee, I will leave to others wiser and more objective to judge. Sergeant Jerry Vick was a street cop, a peace officer, a detective, a Critical Incident Response Team member, an undercover agent and a peacemaker. Jerry Vick was a St. Paul police officer who helped to keep the peace throughout his 15-year career.

Whether it was by crawling into a house ablaze with fire and smoke to save a baby, working with young prostitutes or facing an armed bad guy in a dark alley, Sgt. Vick was a man who never shrank from helping those who couldn't help themselves. Sgt. Vick was the light in the darkness for many.

On Dec. 16, 1990, Jerry Vick entered a home engulfed in flames at 562 Sherburne in Frogtown. He went in despite the flames, despite the smoke, and despite the danger. Vick went in, and then, coughing and struggling for breath, he came out carrying to safety a 1-year-old black child. He again entered the home, continuing his search for more victims. Perhaps if Ms. Magee had wanted a picture of Sgt. Vick, she should have talked to that now 17-year-old young man whose future Vick carried in his hands that night.

Where there was doubt, Sgt. Vick created faith. Sgt. Vick had a light about him that made the teenage prostitutes believe him when he promised to get them help. He gave hope and encouragement to the immigrant women forced into a life of prostitution thousands of miles from home. Those women, so many of them women of color, lost a great ally the day that Sgt. Vick died. The legacy of Sgt. Vick lives on in the Human Trafficking Task Force and in the House of Hope, both named in his honor. Sgt. Vick was committed to protecting those who could not protect themselves.

It's been said that you don't get to be a cop because you couldn't figure out what to major in. You can only do this job because you want it, and Sgt. Vick wanted it. Wanting it has costs, and one of those costs is in the lives of the young men and women who suit up for duty and don't go home that night.

An old friend told me there are three rules of keeping the peace that we must all remember. Rule No. 1 is: "Young people die." Rule No. 2 is: "You can't change rule number one." And Rule No. 3 is: "Somebody's got to walk the point."

When an undercover officer walks into a bar knowing that all around him there are those who would be willing to take an officer's life rather than go to jail - that officer is out there on the point. Sgt. Vick was taking his turn "walking the point" on the night he was killed. He was out there to look, listen, spot the bad guy, and pinpoint an ambush - and as a consequence take those first shots. He was out there to save lives, even if it meant he had to give his. The idea of it offends the logical mind and denies the instinct for survival. It ages and saddens us - and sometimes kills those who, like Sgt. Vick, "walk the point." Sergeant Vick knew that despite the risks the point has to be walked or there would be more bloodshed, more grief and more innocent victims.

Where there was injury, Sgt. Vick helped create an environment of pardon. Sgt. Vick's work with Breaking Free is legendary. If Ms. Magee had wanted the truth and nothing but the truth, she might have talked to the women of Breaking Free about who Sgt. Vick was.

The idea that Sgt. Vick's actions the night he was murdered could be compared to "the antebellum sport of Negro hunting" reflects either ignorance or prejudice and ignores the body of his work as a police officer and a man. Ms. Magee's column is more than just the rant of a person with an agenda of her own - it is a thoughtless, reckless exercise of the rights that Sgt. Jerry Vick worked so hard to protect for all of St. Paul's citizens.

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