

Street crimes unit plagued by deadly aggression

By Damaso Reyes
New York Amsterdam News

All four of the New York Police Department's Street officers who gunned down the unarmed 22-year-old Guinean native, Amadou Diallo, belong to the Street Crimes Unit, created almost three decades ago to hunt down rapists, muggers and other civilian safety hazards.

Now that very unit, created to protect the public, is coming under fire for being too aggressive and too ready to use deadly force.

Created in 1971, the unit has become the darling of Mayor Rudy Giuliani's

administration, which increased the number of assigned officers to 380 — more than doubling its previous size. And, since the unit began expanding, training and screening of officers have declined. Before, officers endured a rigorous screening process — up to half of the volunteers were rejected — and were paired with experienced partners once selected.

Some believe that the combination of an eager new recruit and a police culture that thinks it "owns the night" seems to be a recipe for disaster.

Members also wear T-shirts inscribed with

a quotation from Ernest Hemingway: "Certainly there is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough like it, and never really care for anything else thereafter."

It is precisely this attitude that has so many community leaders outraged. The unit has been given wide latitude to stop and frisk people walking down the street, often without probable cause. They are also preoccupied with getting guns off the streets, even if innocent people are caught in the middle, activists complain.

"We have in the police department ... a very deep-rooted illness called, 'the violation of the constitution,'" said City Councilwoman

Margarita Lopez. "This shooting is the epitome of that."

In January, rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard was shot at eight times by members of the unit, who claimed he had a gun. No weapon was found, and the member of Wu Tang Clan was cleared of any charges by a grand jury.

While the police department will not release figures about racial diversity within the unit, sources claim that only 10 percent of the officers are minorities, despite the fact that the communities they serve are predominantly Black and Latino.

The officers involved in the Diallo case have yet to come forward with their side of the story and remain on modified desk duty.

Ford Heights Four wins \$36 million

By Charles Nicodemus
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Four men wrongly imprisoned in a 1978 double murder won a record \$36 million damage settlement from Cook County Friday, and called for a special prosecutor to probe the "official misconduct" that led to their convictions.

State's Attorney Richard Devine, whose staff handled negotiations for the county, said the settlement brings justice. "While the plaintiffs cannot recover the years they spent incarcerated, this settlement compensates them fairly," he said.

But at a news conference after the settlement was disclosed, one of the so-called Ford Heights Four, Dennis Williams — who spent years on Death Row, retorted, "If someone asked me 18 years ago, 'Can I borrow your life for 18 years for \$100 million?' I would have said, 'Hell, no.' Who is he to say what justice is in this case?"

Three of the five sheriff's deputies accused of hiding and failing to pursue evidence that would have helped exonerate the men are still on the force, and several prosecutors tied to the case remain on the state's attorney's staff.

After an investigation by sheriff's police, the four men — then in their early 20s — were convicted in the gang rape and double murders of Carol Schmal and Larry Lionberg. Williams 44, and Vermeal Jimerson, 46, were sentenced to death. Willie Raines, 45, and Kennie Adams, 41, faced lifelong incarceration.

They were released in 1996 after Northwestern University professor David Protess and his students unearthed proof of the four men's innocence and helped their lawyers and other investigators track down the four killers.

The damage award, approved by Circuit Court

Judge William D. Maddux, "should be a strong message to people who manipulate evidence and wrongly put people on Death Row," said Flint Taylor, co-counsel for Adams.

Larry Marshall, a Northwestern University law professor and co-counsel for Raines, said that "the public should be outraged" not only at the size of the settlement but "by the egregious misconduct" that led to the convictions.

Emphasizing the need for a probe of the sheriff's police and the prosecutors involved, Marshall asked why they should "be able to destroy someone's life and then walk away from it."

Jimerson's lawyer, Mark Ter Molen, who was the first attorney to mount a campaign to prove the four men's innocence, said the \$36 million will be divided depending on how long each man served and whether they

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Engler, Watts join Bush presidential team

WASHINGTON (AP) — Texas Gov. George W. Bush is turning to fellow elected officials to help him get elected president.

Michigan Gov. John Engler, Sen. Paul Coverdale of Georgia and Reps. J.C. Watts of Oklahoma, Jennifer Dunn of Washington and Roy Blunt of Missouri will be members of Bush's presidential exploratory committee.

They will join former Secretary of State George Schultz and about four others on the panel.

Bush wants to show a range of support that reflects the coalition he hopes to build. Watts is one of the nation's leading black elected officials.

Dunn is former state party chair who has urged the party to find ways to appeal to women. Engler is one of 16 Republican

governors who have pledged their support to their fellow chief executive.

"Governor Bush's vision, like my own, is one of less government and greater freedom for every American," Coverdale said Friday.

"His vision has served the state of Texas well, and has set an example for other state and national leaders to follow."

The officials are expected to act as liaisons to their fellow elected officials who might support Bush.

Bush said Tuesday he was forming the committee, the next step toward a full-fledged presidential race expected to begin in late summer or early fall.

He will conduct a news conference Sunday in Austin, Texas, to introduce his committee to the public.

High court hears gifts-to-Espy case

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is trying to sort out distinctions between innocent good will and illegal gifts to government officials, using a case that arose from the corruption investigation of former Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy.

The tangled rules governing gifts or favors that officials may or may not accept on the job were on display during the four-year prosecution of Espy and some of the companies that gave him things.

The independent counsel appointed to investigate Espy asked the justices last week to reinstate the gratuities conviction of Sun-Diamond Growers of California. The farm cooperative's head lobbyist spent \$2,295 for Espy to attend the U.S. Open tennis tournament and otherwise wined and dined him.

"In the first 14 months of Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy's tenure, Sun-Diamond lavished on its chief regulator thousands of dollars in gifts while it had millions of dollars at stake," Deputy Independent Counsel Robert Ray argued last Tuesday.

The court is expected to clarify by July the federal law that makes it a crime to give a gift to a public official "for or because of any

official act performed or to be performed."

Lawyers for Sun-Diamond maintain the company did nothing wrong in giving things to Espy, since there was no arranged quid pro quo and no specific intent to influence him.

Several justices offered hypothetical situations where gifts or invitations could have sinister or pure motives, depending on shades of interpretation.

Justice Antonin Scalia repeatedly used the hypothetical example of the chairman of AT&T doling out cash to the chief of the Federal Communications Commission with no specific strings attached. He asked whether Sun-Diamond's position was akin to AT&T offering money out of a vague hope that the FCC would look kindly on the company.

"Here's \$2 million. Think well of us in all you do in this office," Scalia said to laughter.

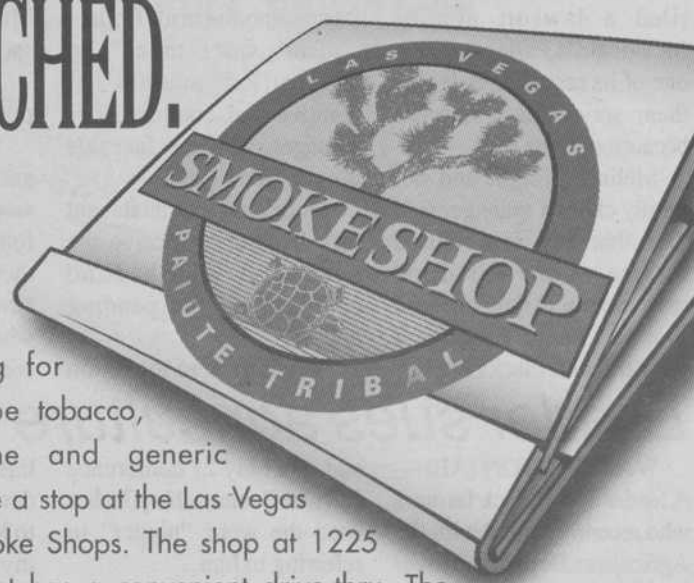
Justice Sandra Day O'Connor asked Ray why a gift is illegal if it is not tied to some specific act by the official.

"It isn't baking brownies for a senator, or knitting a pair of socks for an official, is it?" she asked.

Ray replied that the possibility of future favors to the company is enough.

Ray's boss, Independent Counsel Donald (See Espy, Page 13)

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