

The Pueblo Chieftain

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Pueblo police hand out Meritorious Service Awards to officers, civilians



Troy Eid

By **PATRICK MALONE**
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Bagpipes, tuxedos and elegant gowns replaced sirens, blue polyester and badges for one night. On Friday the Pueblo Police Department held its annual Police Memorial and Awards Banquet at the Pueblo Convention Center.

The keynote speaker, U.S. Attorney for Colorado Troy Eid, urged members of law enforcement to take control of their own fortunes by vocally stating their positions on the issues that affect them most. A couple that he spotlighted were immigration and the need for a federal court in Pueblo.

“In the past year we have doubled the number of federal prosecutions out of Pueblo,” Eid said.

He noted that Plano, Texas, recently got a new federal courthouse just 17 miles from an existing one in Dallas, while Colorado remains the largest state in the nation to have just one federal courthouse, located in Denver.

With immigration at the forefront of political attention, Eid said it has increasingly monopolized the attention of his office. He said immigration cases constitute half of all the work his office conducts,

compared to approximately 10 percent of the workload a decade ago. Between 600 and 700 of those cases involve criminal allegations. Four times that many are civil deportation cases. "We're kind of like the Pueblo Police Department," said Eid. "We have the same number of people in our office (now) that we did 20 years ago."

In order to bring change in the areas that are straining law enforcement, it's incumbent on those affected to make their voices heard, Eid said.

The evening's highlight was the presentation of the Pueblo Police Department's Meritorious Service Awards to officers and citizens. A committee that includes representatives of the police department's command staff, the police union and the police benevolent association chooses the recipients. Nominations are accepted from officers and citizens throughout the year.

The following awards were presented at the ceremony:

Citizens award of appreciation to 9-year-old Chase Seilheimer for providing aid to retired Pueblo police Cpl. Gary Griffin, who fell from a ladder on March 28. Griffin suffered serious injuries and lay helpless for 20 minutes until Chase found him and fetched help.

Citizens award of appreciation to Mike Vigil and the life-saving award to officer Benjamin Muniz for saving the life of a suicidal woman on July 19, when she tried to leap to her death from the Eighth Street Bridge. Vigil and Muniz grabbed hold of the woman as she tried to plunge off the bridge.

Citizens award of appreciation to David Dupps and Mike Lauricella for assisting police in the apprehension of a handcuffed suspect who led police on a long foot chase.

Citizens award of appreciation to King Soopers security specialist Joe Guilitto and Target security specialist Seth Crawford for providing video evidence that was instrumental in the indictment of 20 suspected members of a criminal organization whose fraud, theft and identity theft efforts stung Puebloans for more than \$100,000.

Citizens award of appreciation to KNKN and KRMX, both run by Lupe Brown, for supporting the police department's investigative and humanitarian effort as well as assisting in the department's Spanish language citizens academy.

Commendation to Cpl. Michael Mares and Detective Glen Fillmore for going above and beyond the call of duty for pursuing the investigation of a rape that occurred in Denver, but was reported in Pueblo. Prosecutors earned a conviction based on their efforts.

Commendation to records technician Valerie Garbiso for recognizing a registered sex offender who

was wanted on warrants. During her off-duty hours, Garbiso spied the suspect in a barber shop and reported his whereabouts to police, who arrested him.

Commendation to officers Chad Garcia, Erik Juno and Darren Velarde for recovering 25 stolen vehicles over a one-year span on their own initiative. Garcia also was recognized for a felony traffic stop that netted a stolen Jeep that contained stolen property including credit cards, fake identification cards and methamphetamine.

Commendation to Sgt. Frank Ortega and officers Richard Giconi and James Olonia for tracking down an armed robbery suspect who fired a shot at a liquor store clerk.

Commendation to officer Nathan Pruce for making a traffic stop that led to a substantial cocaine bust.

Commendation to detectives Kevin Buck and James Martin for leading the complex investigation in "Operation Cyclops," which resulted in grand jury indictments against 20 suspects accused of identity theft, counterfeiting, fraud and drug offenses.

Commendation to Detective Chris D'Amour leading a joint investigation with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration on "Operation Ghost rider," in which D'Amour made numerous undercover drug buys that led to the indictment of 11 suspects and the direct filing of criminal charges against 21 others.

Commendation to detectives Mark Thalhamer, Ron Gravatt Jr., Chad Jeffries and Jeff Maize for spearheading "Operation Corey," an investigation of drug trafficking at South High School in the aftermath of student Corey Suazo's death by overdose. Ten adults and six juveniles were indicted by a grand jury as a result of the probe.

Chief's award of merit to retired Sgts. Elias "Rudy" Manzanares and Greg McCaulley, who served the department for 35 and 34 years, respectively, with honor and distinction.

Chief's award of merit to DEA agent Mark McClaire for his work on Operation Ghost rider, which included dangerous undercover work.

Chief's award of merit to Deputy District Attorney Anthony Marzavas for providing legal counsel during Operation Corey that included securing a state-issued wiretap warrant and successful presentation of the evidence to a grand jury.

Chief's award of merit to Cpls. Mike Mares and Phil Casias, Fire Engineer Mark Pickerel and firefighter Erik Duran for building a ramp at the home of a paralyzed man who they met when he was suicidal over his confinement.

Life-saving award to officers Olonia and Christopher Flores for dissuading a suicidal man from jumping off the Santa Fe Bridge and rescuing him from his perch.

Life-saving award to officers Greg Bowen, Ben Candelaria, Flores and Ken Matic for pulling two occupants from a crashed vehicle moments before the engine compartment exploded. One of the rescued men survived.

Distinguished service award to Pruce for his diligence in daily checks on a business that had been targeted by burglars. His efforts paid off when he interrupted a burglary in progress, single-handedly confronted the suspect and, after a long foot chase, apprehended him.

Distinguished service award to Cpl. Kenneth Rhodes and officers Raymond "Cory" Purvis, Jason Smith, Nick Heine, Giconi and Ron Oreskovich for interrupting a video store burglary, ending in a vehicle pursuit with the suspects using skilled traffic techniques and arresting the suspects, who were responsible for numerous crimes.

Distinguished service award to Sgt. Wayne Luizza, officers Olonia, Greg Egan, Jeffrey Capito and Gary Wyberg for acting quickly in the aftermath of a homicide. They located the suspect, who was armed with a gun. After a short standoff, he committed suicide. As his weapon fell, a shot was fired. The bullet ricocheted and pierced the lower pant leg of officer Wyberg. No officers were hurt.

Friday's ceremony was planned and orchestrated by Deputy Police Chief John Ercul.