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Pueblo police officer dies of natural causes on job



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/NATHAN PAPES Pueblo Police Chief Jim Billings talks with the media Saturday about the death of Pueblo Police officer Nicholas Heine.



Officer Nick Heine



Detective Pat Heine

He was 12th officer lost on the job.

**By NICK BONHAM
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

One of Pueblo's finest fell in the line of duty early Saturday, the victim of a congenital heart defect.

Nicholas "Nick" Heine, a seven-year veteran of the Pueblo Police Department and a decorated and well-liked officer, collapsed about 2 a.m. while running between bar disturbances in the Historic Union Avenue District.

Heine died shortly later at Parkview Medical Center. He was 30.

"No one saw this coming. It's a shock," Chief Jim Billings said Saturday morning at police headquarters, where the American flag stood at half-mast in honor of Heine. Dressed in his black police uniform, his badge shrouded in a symbolic black ribbon, Billings said Heine was in good health, was active on the force and described him as "a real go-getter."

"I've known Nick since he was a little guy," the chief said. "My wife did day care for him, so for me it's kind of like a son relationship." Heine's mother and co-worker, Detective Pat Heine, a 19-year veteran of the police department, said her son died of a heart problem that no one knew he had.

"Nick was in very good health," she said. "The coroner said there was a congenital heart defect and it put his heart into a fatal, irregular rhythm. This could've happened 10 years ago or 25 years from now. It was just one of those things that happened.

"I commend the officers who were with him, that held on to him and didn't let him hit the ground. Everyone, the rescue units, people at the hospital, they did everything known to man to save him."

Pueblo County Coroner James Kramer said Heine's heart problem was "uncommon, but not infrequent." Kramer said Heine died of natural causes, not a heart attack.

Heine leaves behind a wife of seven years, Melissa, and daughters, Nichole, 7, and Rebecca, 4.

"Nick was a good father, a terrific husband," said Pat Heine. "He loved his girls, *loved* playing with his girls. He was building them a fort in the backyard which isn't quite completed."

Heine collapsed in the 300 block of Victoria Street, where he and other officers had been dispatched to break up a disturbance, according to police.

Officers already had been in the area working other bar disturbances, so when they were called to a fight at nearby Bongirno's, Heine and crew took off on foot.

Deputy Chief John Ercul was on patrol Friday night and witnessed officers trying to save Heine.

"There were some guys really hurting last night," Ercul said, adding that more officers were called in to help work the streets after the incident. "We're going to miss him, not only as a friend but as an associate, a fellow officer - and a darn good one, too."

Billings said counselors, victim advocates and chaplains were called out Saturday to console officers and will continue to be available.

Heine is the first Pueblo officer to die in the line of duty since 1973, when Cpl. Thomas Hanson was shot by a burglar.

"It's a different dynamic when someone causes the death of an officer," Billings said. "You have a focal point to direct your anger. In this case, there's no one to be angry at. It's one of those tragic things that happened. I was hoping to make it through my career without losing an officer on duty. I've been on the force for 33 years. It didn't happen."

Except for a short stint in investigations while recovering from a knee injury, the majority of Nick Heine's career was spent working the graveyard shift. He enjoyed his time in investigations, though, handling cases in the property crimes unit.

"He did a superb job in investigations," said Ercul, who oversees all of the department's investigation units. "We were all pleased and we were considering him to be one of the next in line for a detective job."

Said Billings: "Nick was good at catching crooks. He has a folder full of commendations for catching robbers, burglars. He was just always in the mix of things."

After graduating from Central High School in 1995, Heine attended the University of Northern Colorado where he majored in music. He played the tuba, trombone, trumpet and drums. But music just didn't strike the note in terms of a career, his mother said.

"He liked music," Pat Heine said. "He did 2 years of college and he said, 'Mom, I think I want to do something different.' I said, 'Great, but you have to find a job.' I never discouraged him or encouraged him (to be a cop).

"If he decided to be a restaurant manager, I would've supported him in that. But he was a good cop, a very, very good cop."

When he wasn't wearing a badge, instructing rookies in defense tactics or spending time with family, Heine also coached a youth team with the Runyon Football League. He never played football in high school, but "he wanted to be active with kids," his mother said.

Funeral arrangements are pending. The police department has declared a period of mourning that will end at midnight the day of Heine's funeral.

IN THE LINE OF DUTY

Officers who have died while in the line of service, and the date they passed away:

- Officer Nicholas "Nick" Heine, June 21, 2008
- Cpl. Thomas M. Hanson, Dec. 29, 1973
- Patrolman Addison O. Hinsdale, Oct. 4 1920
- Patrolman Jeff Evans, Sept. 13, 1919
- Detective John Dunleavy, July 21, 1909
- Patrolman Frederick Barner, March 21, 1909
- Mounted Officer William Shellman, Aug. 12, 1906
- Patrolmen Elwin Slater and Silas Martz, Oct. 7, 1903
- Patrolman Moses Lovern, May 10, 1891
- Marshall Casper Zweifel, July 24, 1984
- Patrolman Alvin Phippeny, June 30, 1879

Source: Pueblo Police Department.