

Police are investigating a murder on Polar Avenue.

PHOTO: ERIC BOND

Takoma Park Police ask community to help find murderer

BY CRAIG STONE

The Takoma Park Police Department is working with Crime Solvers of Montgomery County in the investigation of the murder of Ryan Demarco Lewis, which occurred on the 7100 block of Poplar Avenue on Saturday, May 24, [2003]

Gunshots at 4:30 a.m. woke residents of the quiet neighborhood just blocks away from Old Town Takoma Park. Police were called to the scene to find Lewis, a 19-year-old who lived on Jasmine Terrace in Langley Park, dead on Poplar Avenue near the intersection with Columbia Avenue.

The circumstances of the murder are unknown, and police will not confirm whether or not drugs played a role in the incident. "I have no knowledge that drugs were involved," said Takoma Park Police spokeswoman Carol Bannerman. "We do not release information that would jeopardize an investigation," she added immediately. "If we release information, people may want to think in a particular direction and not think about what they've seen and could provide in the way of leads for investigators to follow."

An autopsy on Lewis was conducted on May 25, but the only result that police would give was that homicide by shooting was ruled the cause of death.

A resident who lives on the block where the murder occurred and wishes to remain unnamed said that, after hearing four gunshots, he looked out the window and saw a silhouette of what appeared to be a man run down Poplar Avenue. The man then ran back up Poplar to Columbia which he took in the direction of the Takoma Park Silver Spring Food Co-op.

"I've always been concerned with the safety of the area," the resident said, but added that this "seems like an isolated incident... walking around at 4:30 in the morning, they weren't just walking home from the Metro." As for extra safety precautions, the resident said, "We try to live our lives the way that we normally do."

Such are the sentiments of many area residents.

"I feel as safe in Takoma Park as I've ever felt," said Judy Kirpich, a 25-year resident who lives on the corner of Poplar and Columbia Avenues.

Kirpich said that she and her husband were awoken by the shots and "immediately looked out the window and didn't see anything—people or cars," so

they went back to bed. "Five minutes later the police arrived."

"We, of course, are upset. This doesn't normally happen here," she said. "To have a dead body outside your house is not something that you can get used to nor do you want to get used to."

Kirpich, like other residents, said that she was more worried about the robberies in the area over the past few years than the murder. "Muggings to me are a lot more scary because they are random," she said. "I have a kid who just graduated from Blair [High School] and I worry about him being out at night."

Betsy Shields, a resident of Columbia Avenue, said, "I was shocked, and then frustrated that the police took so long to remove the body." But she also said that the murder did not make her feel any less safe. "I did not feel terribly threatened by this because I feel like it's something that could have happened anywhere," she said.

Sue Immerman, who lives on Poplar Avenue just a few houses away from where the body was found, said that when it first happened, "I was real upset and I was really concerned about who it might have been."

She said that she does not allow her kids to walk around town at night. "I don't feel any more threatened than I did in the past," she said, adding, "I have always been careful as I walk the streets and I continue to be careful."

This is the first murder in Takoma Park since 2001, and there was one murder in the city every year from 1997 to 2001. Bannerman says that there is no rising trend in violent crime in Takoma Park. She pointed out that there were 50 aggravated assaults in 1998 as compared to 25 in 2002, "So in that instance, aggravated assaults dropped," she said.

As for concern that the hot summer months bring higher crime rates, Bannerman says, "There's not particularly any months that are higher" for violent crimes.

Crime Solvers is offering a reward of up to \$1,000 for information that leads to the identity, arrest, and indictment of anyone involved. Anyone who recognizes Lewis or who has information about his death is encouraged to call Crime Solvers of Montgomery County at 1-800-673-2777 or the Takoma Park Police at 301-891-7148. Callers to Crime Solvers do not need to leave their name if they wish to remain anonymous.

across the equally fuzzy state line, the 4th District of the D.C. Metropolitan Police? There is similar citizen confusion when trying to get a handle on the true extent of crime in the community, for each police station maintains its own crime records.

What is confusing for law-abiding citizens is bliss for savvy criminals, who some observers believe make a practice of committing a crime in one jurisdiction and then quickly fleeing to the adjoining jurisdiction.

In the wake of the murder last year near the Takoma Metro Station, D.C. Councilman Adrian Fenty created an anti-crime task force that includes community members from both sides of the jurisdictional split. According to a task force member, that report is forthcoming.

In the meantime, life—and crime—goes on. Takoma Park Police detectives continue to investigate a June 11 sexual assault in the 7300 block of New Hampshire Avenue as well as a similar assault on May 28 in the 7300 block of Takoma Avenue. Police spokesperson Carol Bannerman advises pedestrians "to pay close attention to their surroundings if they choose to walk alone at night." In addition, she suggests cell phones should be programmed to dial 301-270-1100 in Takoma Park or 9-1-1 elsewhere.

In the end, then, this is both good news and bad news. The bad news, of course, is that there is crime in the Takoma community. The good news is the community response and support that results. In response to the CVS incident, for example, orange-vest patrols en route to the Metro Station now walk on the CVS-side of the street.

CVS corporate management, in answer to customer complaints, has promptly promised to review its security policies. And though the police departments remain separate entities, they continue to maintain good working relations with one another, coordinating and cooperating as needed. That's more than can be said for a lot of big cities, where citizens can feel anonymous and alone. Here, one can always count on being part of the fabric of a "small town" community that cares.

To keep up to date on crime in Maryland neighborhoods, you can check out the Takoma Park Police Message Board at: cityoftakomapark.org/pd/posts

For less official information that includes the Takoma area of the District of Columbia, there is a Yahoo Group called AlertTakoma. This group, which is not a discussion list, describes itself as "a channel for information on crime incidents and immediate actions to take or that have been taken in response. The geographic coverage is the neighborhoods within Takoma Park, Maryland, and the Takoma neighborhood of Washington, D.C., centered on the Takoma Metro Station."