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 Desmares Lewis, which occurred on the 7100 block of Poplar Avenue on Saturday, May 24.

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 spokesperson 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 running down Poplar Avenue. The man then ran back 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, and 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 Kirby Kirkpatrick, a 25-year resident who lives on the corner of Poplar and Columbia Avenues.

Kirkpatrick said that she and her husband were awakened 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.

Kirkpatrick, 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," said Berry 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 Immennman, 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 what 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. "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.