Police praised for highway shooter investigation

Within 10 days of identifying a pattern of random shootings, an investigative team of about 200 people led by Kansas City Police stopped a man who was terrorizing the metropolitan area in a case that riveted the nation.

Over the course of a few weeks in late March and early April, someone shot at multiple vehicles travelling on area roadways – most in the Grandview Triangle area in south Kansas City. Police have connected 13 of the incidents so far, and investigation continues. Three people were struck by bullets but were not seriously injured.

“It was a miracle no one was killed,” said Major Ron Fletcher of the Violent Crimes Division.

National media hovered around the case. Residents reported they were scared and changing their driving habits. And Kansas City Police used technology like never before, as one of the department’s Facebook followers stated, “Truly find a needle in a haystack.”

The shootings started in other cities: Blue Springs and Lee’s Summit. An analyst in the KCPD’s relatively new Law Enforcement Resource Center (LERC) realized the roadway shootings were likely connected and brought the information to the weekly Incident Review and Information Sharing (IRIS) meeting and notified other department elements. At that time, six shootings had taken place in multiple jurisdictions. The department decided to devote extra investigators and resources to the case. Crime Lab analysts prioritized the evidence and linked each of the shootings with ballistics.

Then during the weekend of April 4-6, the shooter escalated, firing at seven vehicles on both sides of the state line. Police went public with the information on Monday, April 7. They asked for tips and told drivers to be vigilant. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives offered their assistance, including investigators, ballistic-sniffing dogs and an $8,000 reward for information that would lead to an arrest. Daily briefings began at KCPD, attended by Chief Darryl Forté and members of the FBI, ATF, Missouri Highway Patrol, Jackson County Prosecutor’s Office and police departments from Lee’s Summit, Grandview and Leawood.

On April 9, investigators received a key piece of information: a tipster had reported seeing a vehicle driving erratically – pulling up to and pacing her car. She took down his vehicle description and license plate number. Patrol officers posted in the Triangle also started looking for that car.

Detectives checked the database of plates spotted by the department’s 12 vehicle-mounted automated license plate readers over the last several months, and found that license plate had been repeatedly spotted at one address. Sergeant Jason Asper said the LERC – which for the first time was operating in 24/7 mode – drew up a list of people who had lived there in the past. Then a Metro Patrol officer remembered responding to a call of a shooting into the house behind that address in November 2013. The Crime Lab soon discovered the bullet recovered from the house on that case came from the same .380 gun used by the highway shooter. The car and address information put Mohammed P. Whitaker, 27, on a list of six to seven suspects police were investigating.

Sergeant Paul Hamilton said Narcotics and Vice Division detectives then began conducting 24-hour surveillance on Whitaker. Their case against him got stronger when a man looking for a dropped cell phone on the side of 104th Street and Grandview Road found a Wal-Mart bag with spent shell casings and ammunition boxes inside. Mohammed Whitaker’s fingerprints were on the bag and shell casing box.

Although all evidence was pointing to Whitaker, Captain David Lindaman said investigators wanted to ensure they kept their minds open to all leads, including additional suspects.

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Officer Michael Huth, a physical training/defensive tactics instructor at the Police Academy, has won the 2014 Thomas R. Meyers Award. The American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS) presented the award to Officer Huth at their annual Law Enforcement Appreciation Luncheon on May 1. The award recognizes an outstanding law enforcement officer who exemplifies professionalism and is a role model in our community.

Entrant Officer Class 150 graduates

Entrant Officer Class 150 graduated April 17 with 40 officers being sworn into the Kansas City Missouri Police Department and eight into outside agencies.

City Hosts Police Fleet Expo-West 2014

Paying attention in class paid off for Fleet Operations Manager Darrell Cooper and the Kansas City Missouri Police Department when he attended the 2013 Police Fleet Expo in Charlotte, N.C.

“We went to the show, and during the wrap-up session, they mentioned they wanted to hold the spring show in Denver or Kansas City,” Cooper said. “So I raised my hand and offered Kansas City.”

His initiative to volunteer the facilities to host the Police Fleet Expo-West 2014 event garnered the department national exposure. It had never been held here before.

There are two yearly Police Fleet Expo shows – one East, one West. The event is geared toward police fleet managers so they can gather information on new vehicle information; how to cut costs and manage fleets more efficiently; share information and ideas; and network with colleagues in the same area of expertise.

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“None of KC’s finest, Dan Ulledahl,” as stated on the Expo’s web site.

Cooper contacted Retired Sergeant Jim Post, past president of policecarowners.com, to display old cars at the convention center in a mini car show, which included the KCPD Eagle show car.

“It’s nice to have connections,” he said. “The car owners brought their cars in on their own, with no pay.”

Placement of the vehicles and more than 60 displays fell on Cooper’s shoulders. One vendor, Ka-Comm, Inc., used a KCPD SUV to showcase their equipment at their booth.

Although it rained during the Ride & Drive portion of the expo, the week’s events went off without a hitch. Cooper was pleased with the end result, saying, “It went pretty smoothly, I thought.”
Retired Chief Bartch passes away

Floyd Bartch, who served at the department for 31 years and was chief from 1996 to 1999, passed away April 18. He is survived by his wife, Myrna, and his three children, all of whom work for KCPD: Major Robin Houston, CSI Supervisor Melanie Bartch and Sergeant Brian Bartch.

In the Kansas City Star story about his death, Retired Chief Bartch was described as “a quiet, thoughtful leader who resolved longstanding pay inequities for officers.” Five hundred officers signed a thank-you card for him during his tenure as chief for his work to reinstate raises after six years without. The Star also described him as, “kind, humble and personal … he enjoyed wide support from the rank and file.”

In recent years, he’d served as vice chair of the Kansas City Police Employees Retirement Systems Board. He was 73 years old at the time of his death.

Orchard grows knowledge

A new project at the Police Athletic League aims to change what the youth who attend know about food.

“One kid mentioned that the only apple he had ever eaten before was in pie,” said Sergeant Brad Deichler of the Youth Services Unit.

So on April 22, Earth Day, Giving Grove and the Police Athletic League partnered together to start the first phase of what will be a substantial orchard on the PAL grounds at 1801 White Ave.

Sergeant Deichler was excited at the opportunity to educate the urban-core youth PAL serves about where food comes from, which is a foreign topic to some of them.

“Food doesn’t just come from Quik Trip,” he said. “A lot of kids have never had fresh organic fruit before and weren’t even aware that fruit grew on trees.”

Giving Grove, an affiliate of the Kansas City Community Garden, is a non-profit organization that provides self-help and educational assistance to low-income people, children and community groups in the Kansas City metropolitan area to grow their own food from garden plots located in backyards, vacant lots, school yards and at community sites. In the past year, they have put in more than a dozen orchards.

Sergeant Deichler became interested in Giving Grove after reading how they had recently helped put an orchard in Kansas City, Kan. He was excited about what it could do for PAL youth.

“Not only does it get them outside, but it helps them be responsible for something,” Deichler said. “We have them help water and pick weeds.”

Right now, the time and care is a two-hour per week commitment to keep the trees watered and weeded.

More than 40 kids, a dozen adults and four staff members helped install the orchard at PAL. It includes 12 fruit trees (apple, pear and peach), as well as a dozen blackberry bushes.

The orchard itself will bear fruit in three years, with each tree providing about 500 pounds of fruit each year. A second phase will be added next year, and a third phase in year three to end up with 40 trees and 20,000 pounds of fruit. Five to six thousand pounds of fruit should be produced for every 12 trees.

“The goal right now is to have an orchard large enough to do a small farmers’ market in the upper PAL parking lot,” Deichler said. “But the ultimate goal is to get families to adopt the trees.”

Once they are in fruit-bearing mode, caring for the orchard becomes very labor intensive. Once a family adopts a tree, they can take it on as their own. They will have to water it, prune it and pick it. Then they can supplement their income by selling the fruit they harvest.

Giving Grove donated their expertise and labor and offered to donate the trees and beds for the bushes, but Sgt. Deichler wanted to make sure the donation went to someone who may not be able to afford it themselves, so PAL – which is supported with private donations – picked up the $1,500 cost. Giving Grove also helped train Sgt. Deichler on proper tree care. Although he is a long-time gardener, Sgt. Deichler said he needs the tree education. He has taken two four-hour classes on care and maintenance but needs to do four a year.

P.O. Rebecca Caster recruited several department members to walk with her at the 26th Annual AIDS Walk on April 26 at Theis Park, near the Country Club Plaza. This was the 2nd year Caster participated. The walk helps the AIDS Foundation raise money and awareness for organizations that provide shelter, medical care and emergency services for the more than 5,700 men, women and children in Kansas City affected by HIV/AIDS. The morning began with thunder, lightning and a downpour but cleared up by the start of the walk.
HIGHWAY SHOOTER, CONT. FROM P. 1

worked closely with prosecutors to determine when detectives had gathered enough evidence to charge Whitaker.

“We would like to have followed him until we had everything on the case done, but we had to weigh public safety,” he said.

Tactical teams arrested Whitaker, the sole suspect, on April 17. He was charged with 18 felony counts and is being held in lieu of a $1 million bond.

Hundreds of “thank you” messages from the public began pouring in by social media, e-mail and phone calls.

“That speaks to how frightened the public was and how relieved they were it was over,” Major Fletcher said.

The seamless teamwork and communication between multiple department elements and federal investigators, as well as cooperation from the public and technology, is what wrapped the case up so quickly, commanders said.