



Shining Light on Sonoma County Sheriff's Descent into Darkness and Mapping a Way Out

by Marie De Santis
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For over two decades we've had a close-up view of the inner workings of our Sheriff's Dept. through the eyes of our clients. The experiences of the women, mostly young, immigrant women of color, have all along revealed severe civil rights flaws permeating the Sheriff's Department.

Despite all efforts toward reform from the outside, - whether through petitions, protests, firsthand accounts, or the decades of lawsuits, - the Sheriff has mostly responded by burrowing deeper into defensiveness and defiance of human rights, bunkering behind the impunity that's been granted by a succession of roll over DA's, a lapdog press that won't dig, a Board of Supervisors that writes the checks and sings praises, and a public finding refuge in disbelief.

The Visible Fin of the Shark that Lurks Below

Now, not at all surprisingly, comes an October 5th, 2015 lawsuit that reads like a shocking dispatch from the violent rampages of a third world totalitarian regime. If events unfolded as the suit claims - and a dozen corroborating statements by victims indicate they did - our Sheriff's Department has descended into the darkest depths of human behavior, in a massive concerted trampling of the people, the social contract, and the peace and justice it's sworn to uphold.

In brief, according to the suit, on the morning of May 28, 2015 a correctional officer displeased with an inmate's verbal response called for backup from other officers. They extricated the inmate who had been locked in his cell, handcuffed him, beat him mercilessly, and made him strip. His tortured screams prompted other inmates to plead with the officers to stop.

The guards responded with more guards, many hooded with badges removed, who together began an orgy of violence that went on for over five hours, as guards went from cell to cell, one after the other, extricating over 20 inmates, delivering a reign of sadistic beatings, terror, and

humiliation, calling the inmates bitches, and under threat of more pain, demanding inmates repeat things like, "This is our house". A Lieutenant and multiple Sergeants were not only present, but were also fully participating and laughing, saying "we can do this all day".

The victim/witness accounts all agree, there was no heat-of-the-moment struggle to fuel this rage, nor reason for officers to fear their safety; the inmate victims had been locked in their cells and then cuffed while beaten. Nor can it be explained by temporary lapses of judgement. The brutality went on unabated for five plus hours. Nor is this a batch of bad apple officers who need firing. There were up to 20 correction officers involved, including ranking officers. None tried to stop it.

This is a violent criminal culture of a powerful public agency that has become immune to limits.

State Sponsored Terrorism

If events occurred as claimed, our Sheriff has engaged in state sponsored terrorism. The existence of four other open civil rights lawsuits against the Sheriff, including a new suit filed Nov. 7, should further alarm the public to the atrocities being carried out in our name, in our community, and in the name of the law. The most recent Nov. 7 suit accuses a Sheriff's deputy of seriously injuring a teenaged girl by tackling her from behind and grinding her face into the gravel. Why? According to witnesses because she verbally objected to the deputy's mistreatment of her sister.

When you consider how very few people can overcome the obstacles in finding and hiring a lawyer who will file against law enforcement, the public needs to grasp that these lawsuits are only the visible fin of the shark that lurks below.

The DA's Dereliction of Duty

No less disturbing than the jail incident itself is District Attorney Jill Ravitch's refusal to investigate, a refusal that is in direct violation of



the American Bar Associations' standards for her job as quoted here....

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION...

STANDARD 3.1 (d) of the PROSECUTOR'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING SUSPECTED LAW ENFORCEMENT MISCONDUCT...

(d) If the prosecutor's office concludes that there is a **reasonable belief** that personnel in any agency or department have engaged in unauthorized illegal conduct, the prosecutor's office should initiate a criminal investigation into the conduct or seek the initiation of such an investigation by an appropriate outside agency or office.

We've bolded the 'reasonable belief' phrase because with all the corroborating victim/witness statements it would be ludicrous for Ravich to say she doesn't have 'reasonable belief' that it happened. It's very simple; if DA Ravich doesn't want to fulfill the minimum standards of her job, she should resign immediately.

The Mushrooming Cloud of Official Brutality

Many of these inmates have troubled lives to begin with. It's straight into those wounds that the Sheriff has ground his jackboots of pain and humiliation. It's these added traumas and bitterness the men will bring home with them to their families and neighborhoods, time bombs some, all of them a searing cautionary tale no one can forget.

Just from our own vantage point we see firsthand how official brutalities seep through communities and hang in homes like a toxic cloud. We have seen so many abused women in poor communities who wait far too long before calling police; because the stories of police brutalities persist, because the women fear police as much as they fear their abusers, because the women want justice, not brutality, for the men in their lives. The pressures in homes and neighborhoods build. The kids run to gangs for safety or turn to drugs for relief. The repercussions multiply.

Body Cameras and Auditors: Insufficient for Reform

There's been a lot of hope placed in the two principal remedies to come out of the County Task Force formed in the wake of Deputy Gelhaus' shooting and killing of 12-year-old Andy Lopez, but the Sheriff has already easily found a way around the intended oversight value of both. In the case of body cameras, in any controversial incident the Sheriff merely declares the incident under investigation, and the video is exempt from public record law. In the case of the auditor, the Board of Supervisors has cunningly assured that the new auditor office will not undertake officer misconduct investigations. It will only review investigations done.....

.....by the Sheriff.

But more to the point, cities around the country have already discovered that these remedies, even when applied under the best of policy, are limited to dealing with incidents after-the-fact. They do little to alter the underlying dynamics that keep regenerating the same rogue behavior no matter how many officers are disciplined. And a November 15th Washington Post investigative report brings home another reality check. It found that cities where the Dept. of Justice had forced years of costly interventions on local police had obtained only mixed results.

Mapping from Monsters to Guardians of Peace

Communities can't turn their backs and allow police to run rampant in the dark any more than they would allow that of their schools. Community members themselves are going to have to roll up their sleeves, pay attention, parse out the tasks, and watchdog, study, analyze, micro-manage and pressure every grain of law enforcement policy and practice – in perpetuity. It's the long, hard road of democracy; doubly hard in the case of our Sheriff for the monster that's been allowed to emerge.

But it's not rocket science. Here's a good place to start, at the source, with the following quote straight from our Sonoma County Sheriff's recruiting web page as it appears at the time of this writing,

"If you have ever dreamed of patrolling from a boat or helicopter; or imagined being a Deputy on the Specialized Emergency Response Team (S.E.R.T), Inmate Classification Specialty Unit, Special Weapons and Tactics Team (S.W.A.T.) or becoming a Communications Dispatcher or Detective, then a career with SCSO is for you!"

[S.E.R.T. is the jail equivalent of S.W.A.T.]
[SCSO is Sonoma County Sheriff's Office]

This is a message perfectly pitched to attracting self-centered, thrill seeking, asocial, immature males fixated on fun times with boy toys and weapons. Clearly this message needs to be changed as we so often get exactly what we ask for.

