

Policeman's death stuns Pine Lake

Violence rare in tiny DeKalb town

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CORRECTION: 08/23/05, A/02: A story in the Aug. 13 Metro section about the death **Pine Lake** police officer Francis Ortega contained an incorrect percentage of revenue generated by traffic fines in **Pine Lake**. About 20 percent of the city's total revenue comes from traffic violation fines.

The scene outside the **Pine Lake** Police Department on Friday morning was out of place in the little town in DeKalb County that feels like a 1950s lake resort. Television trucks were parked nearby, and camera crews were set up. The town's police chief, Sarai Y'Hudah-Green, was holding a news conference on the shooting death of Officer Francis Ortega, who was killed in a shootout Thursday afternoon at the **Pine Lake** post office. "Officer Ortega loved his job and loved his family," she said. "He was just a hardworking man just trying to provide and have the best for his family." Y'Hudah-Green was outside because the tiny Police Department is too small to handle such a crowd. The department is on the bottom floor of what used to be a Unitarian church.

In the seven decades of its existence, the town of about 600 in south DeKalb has been known as a quiet artist's enclave within the busy metro area -- and as a place with traffic tickets as its main source of income, generating \$1.2 million one year. But **Pine Lake** has never been known for crime. Ortega's death, and the death of the man police believe killed the officer during a traffic stop, then shot at police from the post office where he died, shattered the peace the town works hard to keep. "It's the first homicide that I'm aware of in **Pine Lake**, period -- much less a police officer being killed," said City Administrator Philip Howland, 51, who moved here 15 years ago. "One civic group ranked us as the safest place in Georgia because we have a good police force, and a diligent police force."

The day after the double shooting, authorities were trying to determine how an apparently routine traffic stop on Rockbridge Road turned deadly. Ortega, 25, who arrived as the backup officer about 5 p.m. Thursday, was shot in the head, allegedly by the driver who had been stopped, police said. DeKalb County police Chief Louis Graham identified the gunman as Cedric O'Neal Gordon, 31, of Wisconsin. Gordon fled into the post office and was found dead of a gunshot wound when police entered the building. Police fired into the building, but Graham said investigators are awaiting a medical examiner's report to determine whether Gordon killed himself or was killed by police.

There were customers and employees in the building during the shootout, Graham said. No one else was injured, police said. The chief did not provide details about whether Gordon had been in Georgia for a time or was passing through, whether he owned the vehicle he was driving or

whether the gun he allegedly used in the shooting was legal. Officials in Wisconsin said Gordon had a criminal record there for violent offenses. In 1991, Gordon was sentenced to 10 years in prison followed by two years of probation for convictions for armed robbery and battery in Racine County, said John Dipko, spokesman for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. Dipko said Gordon had since violated his probation on another charge and officials were searching for Gordon at the time of Thursday's shooting.

Ortega had worked part time with the **Pine Lake** department since March 16. He also was a police officer at Georgia Regional Hospital in Decatur, where he had worked full time since May 2003, according to Wayne Melton, training director at the Georgia Peace Officers Standards and Training Council, the state agency that certifies officers. On Friday morning, a basket was placed outside the Police Department for neighbors to donate money to his family. The Georgia Sheriffs' Association donated \$2,500 to Ortega's wife, Laura Ortega. He had a son, 6, and a daughter, 18 months, said **Pine Lake** Mayor Greg Zarus.

Administrator Howland was one of the last people to speak to Ortega, talking to him about 4:45 Thursday afternoon when Ortega returned Howland's lost cellphone. "He joked around with me," Howland said. "He was always joking around." A few minutes later, Howland got word that an officer was down and learned it was Ortega. Some people in the town Friday said **Pine Lake** police still stop too many cars along Rockbridge Road and the shootings should prompt the city to reappraise police vigilance. "The town is lovely, but some of the law enforcement needs to go back to school," said Mike Johnson, 32, stopping in at the post office. "I feel like sometime when I am passing through here I am being harassed."

Zarus said the city has cleaned up its act. "**Pine Lake** is no longer a traffic stop," he said. "There is some history in the past of inappropriate policing, but our traffic fines have been reduced since then." Fines for traffic violations amount to about 120 percent of total city revenue, he said. Violent crime in the town is almost nonexistent. In 2004, **Pine Lake** had no homicides, no rapes, one robbery and one aggravated assault. Shelda Plumb, a resident of 10 years, described the mood in the town as "shocked -- the reality of the larger world that we live in has hit home here, one of the safest places in the state." Plumb planned to participate in a candlelight vigil for Ortega on Friday night down by **Pine Lake**, where, in the summer, neighbors usually gather to walk dogs, play with their kids and socialize in a manner that seems almost quaint. "This is a town where, if you drive through, people wave at you," Plumb said. "Not because they know you, but just because they're friendly."

-- Staff writers Bill Montgomery, Rhonda Cook and Karen Hill and staff researcher Sharon Gaus contributed to this article.

Photo

Pine Lake Officer Francis Ortega was gunned down during a traffic stop, police believe.

Photo

RENEE HANNANS HENRY / Staff

"Officer [Francis] Ortega loved his job and loved his family," **Pine Lake** police Chief Sarai Y'Hudah-Green said Friday.