

VELVET GLOVE OR IRON FIST?;THE BAD COP IS HIS PUBLIC IMAGE. THE GOOD COP IS HOW HE SEES HIMSELF. MINNEAPOLIS POLICE LT. MICHAEL SAURO, WHO GREW UP ON THE EAST S....

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THE EAST SIDE, SAYS HIS VALUES AND PRINCIPLES COME FROM THERE.**

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Body

Police Lt. Michael Sauro is either a bad cop too long tolerated and rewarded, or he is a good cop suffering every good cop's worst nightmare.

But even people who never met him figure he must be the baddest cop in Minneapolis. He's the only police officer the city's mayor has ever fired.

Sauro is 42 and not a real big guy - 6 feet tall and 175 pounds - but he works out for two hours every day at a health club to keep in shape. He is a peace officer who describes police work - in a city infiltrated with gangs and staggering from a record homicide rate - as urban combat. He wore high, lace-up, steel-toed paratrooper boots on the job.

He is the son of a social worker. But after 20 years as a cop, he refers to Liberal as "the L word," like it's a dirty name.

He is an articulate college graduate with a four-year degree in psychology who, when relaxed, punctuates his speech with double negatives and "ain't."

He will describe his approach in handling a potentially difficult suspect as "a Skinnerian thing" (as in B.F. Skinner, behavioral psychologist) but then allow as how sometimes, though, "Boom! It's fist city."

Sauro has a reputation as a "thumper," a cop who punches, beats and stomps on people.

He became the ultimate bad cop, the cop Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton wanted to get rid of, one day in 1994 when a civil jury's verdict in a brutality case against him cost the city more than \$1 million in court-ordered damages and legal costs.

Craig Mische, a former University of St. Thomas hockey player, testified Sauro beat him and kicked him while he was in handcuffs on New Year's Eve 1990. Mische had been involved in a fight in the now-closed Jukebox Saturday Night nightclub in Minneapolis, and had jumped on Sauro's back. During the trial, the jury viewed a poster-sized photograph of Mische's swollen, bruised and bloodied face.

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More recently, a labor arbitrator decided Sauro did not use excessive force against Mische. Mische's injuries were actually minor and his allegations against Sauro were not consistent with the medical evidence, the arbitrator said in a 34-page ruling last month.

The mayor said she was "outraged" by the arbitrator's decision, demonstrators protested at City Hall and Sauro was placed on leave while another investigation about his alleged use of excessive force was launched.

Sauro has been unemployed and without a paycheck now for almost a year. But for him, work and identity are much the same. He is still a cop more than anything else. He still automatically sits with his back to the wall and his eyes to the door in a restaurant. He is still the man accustomed to knocking on a door, then moving to one side, in case the knock is answered with a bullet.

As a cop, he liked to be where the action was. He sought assignments in the worst neighborhoods, rode the "hot" cars, worked the night "power shift." He logged 32 citizen complaints during his 20-year career, most of them involving excessive force. But none was ever upheld by the department's internal affairs unit or led to discipline.

He was promoted to sergeant and selected for FBI SWAT school, Secret Service dignitary protection training and other special programs. He was promoted to lieutenant in 1992 - after the Mische incident - and commanded a shift of 45 officers and five sergeants. When he was fired, he was one of just 35 lieutenants in the 850-member department.

The bad cop is his public image. The good cop is how he sees himself. And he is not alone in that appraisal.

Honest. Hard working. Idealistic. Passionate about police work. That is how some of the people who know him well describe him.

"He is an excellent officer and a credit to the Minneapolis police department," says Gail Baez, senior attorney in the adult prosecution division of the Hennepin County Attorney's office. Baez met Sauro 10 years ago when he was a patrol officer in the 3rd and 4th precincts, where the city's violent crime rate is highest. He worked on cases with her then and later, when he was an investigative sergeant assigned to the robbery-homicide and sex crimes units.

"What happened to him is tragic," Baez says. "And I think what happened to him could happen to any police officer who has worked the streets like he has. When they look at Sauro, I think a lot of cops feel, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Says Michael Schoeben, a retired, 25-year veteran of the police department who was Sauro's partner on the city's Northside for five years: "One thing I know about Mike Sauro is that in all the time I worked with him, he never embellished anything, lied to me or did that in reports. He always told the truth. And I never saw Mike go out of his way to become involved in a situation where it was going to turn into violence. That's just nuts!"

Adds John Rouner, a detective sergeant in the criminal investigations division's robbery unit: "Police officers don't have a problem with a crooked cop being brought to justice - at all. The problem is that in Sauro's case, he's not a crooked cop. What's happened to him is just a travesty, a terrible miscarriage of justice."

Sauro is out of uniform - wearing jeans and a long-sleeved khaki shirt - and sits in the living room of his three-bedroom ranch in Edina for a recent interview. The room is sparsely furnished: chair, couch, table, lamp, a cabinet with a television set, on which he likes to watch documentaries, like those about World War II. His dog, "Sarge," an overly friendly golden retriever, sits at his feet.

In a corner of the room, two hockey sticks, one tall and one short, lean against a wall. The short stick is for Nicholas, his 2-year-old son. Since Sauro has been without a job, he's been taking care of Nicholas about four days a week. Their night routine includes leaning back on a bed pillow together for 20 minutes of reading books like "The Lion King" and "101 Dalmatians." Sauro has been using his home computer to teach Nicholas numbers, letters and shapes.

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He says that one lesson he will not teach his son, though, is to turn the other cheek "because there's too many people out there teaching their kid not to turn the other cheek - to grab, steal, punch, kick, do whatever you gotta do to get what you gotta get and get it now. And if a guy turns the other cheek, that's a sign of weakness, take everything from him."

Sauro says his dad, Nick Sauro, taught him to defend himself. "He always said if you say something, be prepared to back it up with verbalization, with facts and figures. And if it gets to the point where they don't want to verbalize any more and they want to get physical with you, hey, don't back away. Don't ever be the aggressor, but, hey, you're there to rock and roll if it comes down to it."

Those were the days of taunts in the school yard at Blessed Sacrament or challenges in the back of the school bus on the way home from Hill High School.

"Everybody fought," says Sauro. "But back then, it wasn't drive-bys or going home to get the 12-gauge or the Uzi or the 9-mm. It was hand to hand and when the guy went down, that was the end of it."

There was another difference, he says.

"When the cops came, you ran," he says. "In Minneapolis, now, you're a cop, and you get to the door and you hear, 'F-- you, f-- you. Where's your warrant? I'm going to kick your f-- ass. You ain't got a right to be here.' They get all pumped up. And pretty soon they're on your back, trying to pummel you to the ground. It's a whole different world."

Sauro spent his early childhood in the Italian-American community on the Upper Levee in St. Paul. When houses there were demolished in the late 1950s, his family moved to the West Seventh Street neighborhood near the Landmark brewery and later to the East Side.

He was an only child and his parents divorced - amicably - when he was still in grade school. He spent some summers in Pennsylvania, with his dad. Nick Sauro has a sociology degree from Macalester College and a master's degree in social work from Tulane University and was working then as a youth director for a neighborhood youth center in Philadelphia.

Otherwise, Michael Sauro lived with his mother, who worked full-time at secretarial and other office jobs. "I raised him in a Catholic household, with absolutely right and wrong values," says Lorraine Kolling, who remarried and has a daughter and another son by her second marriage.

Says Sauro, "I can wash, iron, cook, clean - I picked up all that stuff from my mom. And probably a little more of the morality. Men are a little less moral than women, I think."

Unlike many of his friends who had to go home at night when the street lights went on, Sauro says he had no curfew and few rules to obey. "But my parents had already ingrained in me what was expected - like you gotta get eight hours of sleep so you're ready for school in the morning and set aside time for your homework - things like that."

He had no particular ideas for his future, other than "to be happy, make some money to live." He expected to go to college and "Become some type of professional, but I knew I wasn't going to be a doctor or a physicist - I wasn't smart enough."

After graduating from Hill, then an all-boys Catholic high school, he enrolled in a liberal arts program at Hamline University. He lettered in varsity hockey and graduated in 1975 with a 3.2 grade point average. He also worked in janitorial and maintenance jobs throughout college and was an employee of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority.

He began taking law enforcement tests and applying to police departments for jobs six months before he graduated from Hamline.

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"Law enforcement is a people thing - I like people," Sauro says. "And in police work you get a decent enough salary. If you don't get divorced too many times, you'll have a little before you die."

He also liked the idea of a civil service job "because it ain't you kiss so-and-so's butt and you kiss so-and-so's butt and you kiss so-and-so's butt and then you're a sergeant. No, no, no. Six months before they promote, they tell you all the questions are coming out of these five or six books, do what you want. And I know what I did. I studied two hours a day for six months. I had those books read, highlighted and broken down into like 95 pages of typewritten notes."

Neither of his parents liked the idea of their son becoming a cop. His dad wanted him to become a lawyer. His mom wondered if he was prepared for the tough realities of police work.

"He had had a kind of sheltered life, and I sat him down and said, 'Is this absolutely what you want to do?'" she recalls. "At that time, the disrespect was starting - calling police officers pigs and everything. I'm very thin-skinned when it comes to my children. I wouldn't be able to stand it if someone called him a pig."

Sauro says 3,000 people took the test to join the Minneapolis Police Department when he did, and he emerged as one of the top 30 scorers. That meant his personality profile closely matched the best officers already in the department.

He was still a rookie when he became partners with Schoeben. The two worked the 7 p.m. to 3 a.m. "power shift" in North Minneapolis.

"He was a young, very trustworthy, very dedicated officer," says Schoeben. "And most people who work the power shift are aggressive. We were called on to back up squads and took a lot of the more dangerous calls. We liked the action, and we were a high productivity team."

Sauro worked 11 years in uniform patrol, and during most of those years he and his partners averaged 300 arrests or more a year.

"Michael throws himself at his work," says Schoeben of Sauro. "He is the type of person who doesn't walk away from things. If something doesn't look right, he feels he has to look into it."

That attitude, plus the number of arrests made and the areas of the city that Sauro worked in, helps explain the 32 citizen complaints against Sauro, according to Schoeben.

"People say, 'Oh, my God!' when they hear he has 32 complaints, but 32 complaints is like 1 1/2 a year for God sakes," says Schoeben. "If I were a supervisor and I had a whole group of officers who were not generating complaints, I wouldn't think they were doing their job."

When Sauro advanced to supervisory roles, he emphasized the importance of handling calls and resolving problems, according to Rouner, who worked under Sauro for five years.

"His big thing was, if you're sent to a call, handle the call," recalls Rouner, who was a rookie when he first worked under Sauro. "He didn't like a situation where a citizen would call the police and an hour later call back again. He felt you weren't really delivering service."

"He said if there was a problem, we had the authority and the mission to deal with it and that we should deal with it. If it required making an arrest, doing a lot of paperwork - if that's what it takes, you do it. He always held his officers to a very high standard and stressed professionalism."

"He viewed our role as protectors of the truly oppressed in our society: women, particularly single moms, children and old people," Rouner continues. "On the other hand, he has a hard time viewing some 19-year-old gang member selling drugs on the corner, who is willing to corrupt his community, as a victim."

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Sauro says he divides police misconduct into two categories: honest mistakes made by an officer in the heat of battle, and criminal acts, such as theft, sexual assault, use of illegal drugs and forgery.

Use of force is not misconduct, and the point at which it becomes police brutality is a matter of perception, he says.

"It is in the eye of the beholder," he says. "What I perceive as police brutality from a professional, highly trained, highly experienced viewpoint versus what a peace protester perceives is a whole different thing."

The first level of force is a police officer's presence, Sauro says. Then, it's words. The cop might say, "You guys are going to have to go." Later, the intensity of the verbal exchange can escalate to the cop saying, "Get the f-- out of here, or you're going to jail." Finally, Sauro says, "It's catching a nightstick across the back of the head - 'cause that's coming, that's coming, if you don't move, and you start clenching your fists and say to the cop, 'Why don't you make me?'"

"And sometimes you can't work your way up, you don't go through verbalization and all that stuff. Sometimes you get there, and the guy has a gun pointed at you, and you go right to deadly force. The suspect always dictates the amount of force used. They act. We react."

Sauro has had his share of injuries over the years. He's on his third set of front teeth. He's sprained his ankles, crushed a finger and cracked a rib. He had to have one knee reconstructed after he tore ligaments breaking up a bar fight on the North Side. He's also had back surgery.

"When you're in uniform, you're on the scene - right now," Sauro says, slapping his hands together to emphasize how abruptly that can happen. "Everybody's fightin', everybody's got blood on them, everybody's pumped up and drunk. A treatment professional will tell you, put 'em in a holding cell, wait 'til they're sober, then we'll deal with them. We don't have that luxury. We gotta deal with them right now. Hey, we're the last resort. We're it."

Sauro says a criminal history check revealed all 32 of the excessive force complaints made against him were made by people who had prior criminal records and that collectively the 32 people had been arrested more than 400 times. He also says 90 percent of the people involved in those complaints were under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

"It's pure, unadulterated, raw, hard-core criminals that are complaining against me," he says. "And don't get me wrong. I didn't beat them because they were criminals. I was dealing with animals. I mean, my dog is more human than them. He goes to the bathroom outside, tries to keep himself clean and stuff. These guys, no way."

"So, if you want to be critical, hey, that's fine," Sauro says. "Then you go do the job, you show me how it's done. And don't forget to dial 911 if things get out of hand..."

"But I might be a little slow getting there," he laughs slyly. "You might have to take a couple of smacks in the head first to learn your lesson."

A jury awarded \$700,000 to the college kid who jumped on his back. Sauro is living off a savings account, which is down to almost nothing. His girlfriend, the mother of his 2-year-old son, moved out of his house. He still hopes they will get married if he can put the chaos of the last five years behind him.

He's applied for more than 10 law enforcement jobs elsewhere in Minnesota during the past year. No one tells him why he gets rejected. But no one needs to.

"They're afraid," he says, laughing bitterly. "I mean, who needs all the hassles? I got qualifications up the wazoo. But who needs to spend \$80,000 worth of legal fees every three months on the guy? I'd bankrupt most cities in Minnesota. Because of lawyers. Bloodsucker lawyers. Because the way the civil system is set up, you sue."

He says he survived that New Year's Eve at Jukebox Saturday Night five years ago by "pure, raw instinct instilled through 15 years of training."

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"You've got to be like a computer, with all these variables in your head, and then you've got to decide what to do with them - and you gotta do it in an instant and under total duress," he says. "That jury sat for eight days and considered my case, air-conditioned room, lunch brought in..."

The jury "destroyed me," he says. "I think they thought I was the cop from hell."

Sauro was wearing his uniform and a gun in a holster when Craig Mische jumped on his back and pinned his arms down. Mische - or anyone in the crowd - could have reached for his gun.

"When he jumped on my back, he committed a felony assault on a police officer," says Sauro. "You know what a lot of people say about that? 'End of story. What happens from there is just too bad for him.' I mean, he should have been charged and convicted. And I shouldn't have had five years of legal hassles."

But his father says, "If you blame the system, you blame no one. It's like when you blame society for something. You're blaming nobody, really."

And Nick Sauro says his son is partly to blame for the mess he's in. He thinks that when the city offered to settle the case with Mische for \$415,000, his son should have gone along with it and then gone back to work.

"I'm more practical," Nick Sauro says. "If the city wants to pay, fine. But Mike, who is very principled, didn't think this guy deserved that amount of money and so he objected. But what he really did was put himself in harm's way. Because when they lost in court, the city felt betrayed. And they started looking for a scapegoat. And who was that? Mike."

Sauro's mother says she knows others wink when she insists she didn't raise perfect kids but she did raise decent, hard-working, law-abiding ones. They believe she is just sticking up for her son.

But she says if she were ever in trouble on one of her walks through the St. Paul skyways at night, she would want a cop to help her, a cop like Michael Sauro.

"He has that presence," she says. "When you see him, that presence says authority and, maybe, 'Don't mess with me.' To be authoritative I think is good. If you were in harm's way, that is the kind of police officer you would want protecting you. That's what they're there for, right?"

Meanwhile, Michael Sauro faces an uncertain future. But he sleeps at night.

"If I'd got knocked out by Mische, we would have never heard about it," he says. "The only reason was, I won. And it's better that I won there than in court. Because there are no appeals on the street. It's much less forgiving.

"A cop told me once a long time ago: If you can't win on the street, you can't win in court. Because you never make it to court."

TRAIL OF SAURO

Dec. 31. 1990: Minneapolis police Lt. Michael Sauro allegedly beats Craig Mische.

July 1994: A federal jury awards Mische \$450,000 in actual damages and \$250,000 in punitive damages. The total cost of the trial, with legal fees, is more than \$1 million for the city of Minneapolis.

January 1995: Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton fires Sauro, who appeals the decision.

December 1995: Sauro wins appeal; arbitrator rules he did not use excessive force and was wrongfully discharged from his job. Police Chief Robert Olson places Sauro on leave while another excessive force complaint investigation is launched. Sauro seeks an injunction to block the city from placing him on leave.

Graphic

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Photo: Chris Polydoroff, Pioneer Press

Minneapolis police lieutenant Michael Sauro is reputedly a "thumper" who punches, beats and stomps on people. But he sees himself as a good cop, bent on upholding the law, who uses force only when suspects make him.

Photo: Chris Polydoroff, Pioneer Press

Lt. Mike Sauro, meeting with Al Berryman, president of the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis, has the support of many of his fellow officers. A number of them are wearing navy blue buttons bearing the number 6313 - Sauro's badge number - to show their support.

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