



ANGEL OF JUSTICE GETS A PROPER BURIAL

PHOTO BY TONYA TANKSLEY

The group Garden of Innocents organized a service Friday for "Baby Raguel" at the Calvary Cemetery chapel.

Police, some of whom have seen it all, go the extra mile for baby left in trash bin.

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Patricia Allen celebrated her 25th anniversary as a St. Louis cop on Friday. Instead of a party, she helped put together a funeral. She is a lieutenant, the commander of the Sex Crimes and Family Violence unit. The unit came out in force Friday afternoon to bury Baby Raguel.

Tonya Tanksley, a child abuse detective, came up with the name Raguel. "We wanted an angel, and Raguel is the angel of justice," she told me.

Baby Raguel's case is a strange one. Justice might be hard to define, let alone achieve.

The case began on Thanksgiving

morning when Tanksley received call that paramedics had recovered the body of an infant from a Dumpster in the alley behind a house near Fairground Park on the city's north side.

The infant was wrapped in two grocery store plastic bags and a large black trash bag.

A paramedic told the detective there had been a 911 call in which young woman said she had received phone call from a friend who said she had just given birth and had put the baby in the Dumpster.

By the time the paramedics arrived

the baby girl in the Dumpster was dead. Had she ever been alive? Or was she stillborn? Was she a full-term infant?

"She was a beautiful baby girl. She had a full head of hair and fingernails," said Tanksley, who has been a child abuse detective for four of her 18 years as a police officer.

Of course, medical determinations require harder science. A pathologist examines the body, conducts appropriate tests and reports his or her findings to the chief medical examiner, who also reads the relevant investigative reports before determining a final cause and manner of death.

That process is not yet complete, Baxter Leisure, executive assistant to the medical examiner, said Friday. He said the final decision might not be made for several weeks. Because the matter is pending, he declined to release the infant's length and weight.

The young woman who was identified as the mother was a college student, home for the holiday. She initially told police she did not know she was pregnant. Because the case is still open, police declined to discuss details of the investigation.

No one from the family claimed the baby's body.

Tanksley heard about this. She spoke with Rose Psara, the chief investigator for the medical examiner's office. Psara knew of an organization called Garden of Innocents that provides memorial services and burials for unclaimed children and infants in the St. Louis region. The organization has a small plot in Calvary Cemetery.

About a dozen police officers gathered at the chapel in Calvary Cemetery Friday afternoon. Tanksley had notified the baby's family about the service, and several attended. The mother was not among them.

The baby's body was in a small white coffin on a table in front of the coffin. A flower was on top of the coffin. A candle burned on one side. A small teddy bear leaned against the front of the coffin.

Rebecca Navarro-McKelvey, the president and founder of Garden of Innocents, spoke. She said we were celebrating that God had given us Raguel.

Tanksley spoke. "Today is not about blame," she said. She was looking at the baby's family. "It's about compassion and honoring the life of a little person."

Then she thanked Navarro-McKelvey, and hesitated. "I am the police, so I am not going to cry," she said.

Deacon Peter Gounis conducted a short service. He said that sometimes when you see a lot of evil, it's difficult to believe there is a God. He was looking at the police officers.

Patrolman John Leggette sang a stirring "Amazing Grace." He is assigned to the Fifth District, and had been answering radio calls since 6 that morning. He had been recruited for the service by Lt. Allen. They are both in the police choir.



After the service, we went to the Garden of Innocents plot. The organization has been in existence for 11 years. Its 20-foot-square plot was donated by Monsignor Robert McCarthy of the Catholic Cemetery Association. A memorial stone lists 20 names. All first names.

The weather was cold, and Deacon Gounis kept the service blessedly short. The tiny coffin was put into the ground.

The family had come to the

gravesite, but they stood apart from the detectives.

Afterward, I congratulated Allen on her 25 years. She started as a patrolman, and then she worked narcotics, and she was a sergeant in the child abuse unit for a few years.

Twenty-five years can go by in a hurry, but it can seem like a long time, too.

"You always wonder why people do what they do," she said.