

RETIRED ORGANIZED CRIME UNDERCOVERS START NEW LIVES AS THEY MARK THE END OF AN ERA

By Eddie Vega

On a cool October evening as he gazed across the long ballroom of Queen's Joya Hall, UC25382 looked for people he knew by their real names. They knew his. There are many drug dealers, couriers, and bodega opportunists either in prison or out on parole who wish they knew it too.

The UC in the name stands for undercover. Combined with the officer's badge number it formed the code name by which his superiors and other undercover would refer to him when discussing a drug case. He became close friends with some while others died knowing him only by those letters and numbers. And there was much discussion at Joya Hall, among the over 500 retired and active undercover police officers and investigators there, about those still among them and those for whom the bells had tolled. They were there to remember, to grieve, to celebrate, and to honor the men and women of the New York City Police Department's Organized Crime Control Bureau (OCCB), which was disbanded in 2016. This was their first reunion.

Begun in the aftermath of the Knapp Commission (1970), the OCCB was tasked with combating organized crime, from the various imported mafias, Italian, Chinese, East German, Albanian, and the Irish mob (known as the Westies), to homegrown street gangs relatively unknown outside their local neighborhoods, the Ghost Shadows, their rivals the Flying Dragons, BTK (the Vietnamese gang, Born to Kill), and to the internationally infamous Latin Kings, MS 13, the Bloods, the Crips, and the Hells Angels, a politically savvy biker gang that won two seats on the community board responsible for Manhattan's Lower East Side, where they are headquartered. Throughout its 46 years of existence, the OCCB obliterated countless operations trafficking in illegal drugs, firearms, sex work, and child prostitution and sent hundreds to prison.

Affable and gregarious, UC25382 smiles broadly and openly at anyone he meets, for the first time or the hundredth. There was Diane G. and Jackie C., female undercover with whom he had worked in the narcotics division, buying illegal drugs in Washington Square Park and from sellers in bodegas and housing project apartments. And there were others not to be identified even by initials. They were not his partners per se, since undercover work alone and bring in other division members only for a bust or to estab-

lish credibility. They worked out of the same office, shared leads, and helped with arrests. For a time, he was assigned to the New York Drug Enforcement Task Force, which consisted of federal U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents, New York State Troopers, and New York City Police detectives, and deputized as a federal marshal so he would have the authority to arrest suspects of federal crimes. Down the hall from his office worked another New York City police detective with hair down to the middle of his back, seven diamond earrings, and a big goatee who oversaw a two and a half year investigation in which his team seized more than 10 tons of cocaine, and \$60 million in drug proceeds from the Cali Cartel, and who would go on to become the department's 40th commissioner: Bernard Kerik.

In part because his natural ability to gain the confidence of others and because he was of Asian descent, a rarity in the police department at the time, UC25382 was recruited to work undercover soon after graduation from the police academy and infiltrate Chinese drug syndicates in the three Chinatowns, centered in Lower Manhattan, Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and Flushing, Queens. Luck was on his side. He learned of a club where dealers, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Asians, and Italians socialized and scored deals. It was located in Manhattan's Chinatown, a few doors from where his parents had once owned a store, and so he knew many of the addicts and street dealers who frequented the club by their nicknames. He made a point of becoming reacquainted with them. After that he joined them in the club where they came to see him as one of their own. He also knew that much of the heroin being sold by non-Asian groups in other parts of the city came from a Chinese connection. And so he sought to gain the confidence of the members of the Chinese Triad associated with several Chinese gangs, the Ghost Shadows, Flying Dragons, and White Tigers who were club regulars, though they would not be there at the same time for territorial reasons. He wanted to get at the source. He started by buying small amounts of cocaine from a Colombian suspect, under three ounces each time, A2 felonies at most, but while making one of the buys he witnessed two Puerto Ricans named Florentino and Lolli selling significant amounts of heroin mere feet away. He turned his investigative eye on them and made incremental buys of three kilos of her-

oin with a street value of \$460,000. That in turn led to gaining the trust of the Chinese Triad members. And that led a few months later to an A1 felony buy across the river at a hotel near the New York end of the Lincoln Tunnel that broke a police department record: three kilos of nearly pure heroin with a street value of \$25 million.

His method was simple. Ask them to pick the venue for the buy and he would determine the time but would insist the venue be near the tunnel because he would need to rush out in time for another buy in New Jersey. That gave them a sense of control. If they picked the venue, it would not be bugged, they reasoned. But in fact the number of hotels near the tunnel was very small and law enforcement had established relationships with them. Both the room of the buy and the one next door were part of the operation, and the buy room was wired with a pinhole camera mounted in a lampshade atop a television set, an awkward sight to be sure, but one that was consistent with the reality of a cheap hotel. Using the same strategy, UC25382 would go on to break his own record seven months with a buy of 7.5 kilos with a street value of \$100 million.

Many at the reunion have similar Hollywood-ready stories to share, some with screenplays and memoirs in hand. One of them, Joe Lisi, who retired from the NYPD a captain, actually made it as a Hollywood actor with screen credit for *Man on a Ledge* (2012), *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (2010) and *Kiss of Death* (1995) and a dozen other films. Unsurprisingly, he has also played a cop in episodes of *Blue Bloods*, *Law & Order* and *Third Watch*. Another former OCCBer, Ylka Morales, started her own cigar company, La Viuda Negra, whose Dominican hand-crafted leaf with dark chocolate and smoked almond notes have been getting nods of pleasure from cigar aficionados; still another, Ray Gong, retired as a detective, aims his trained eyes on the feed of over 1,000 security cameras coming from the entire Long Island Railroad system, including Penn Station, a critical duty in the age of global terrorism. For many, retirement is not the ending of a story, but the beginning of many new ones, and for a change, one in which they can live and work openly under their own names.

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