

Homicide victim was a role model

By Kris Stadalsky
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What was set to be an exciting day for one group of people was a grief-filled day for another. As the National Heritage Corridor runners hit the I&M canal towpath as part of their 25k run on Sunday, September 24th, they came across the family and friends of Michael Sarniak who was shot to death on the same trail just three weeks ago.

The Sarniak family stood at the site of the murder, holding up signs showing a sketch of a man wanted for questioning in the investigation. The poster promised a reward for information leading to the arrest of the assailant. Runners took off their hats, saluted or made the sign-of-the-cross in a show of sympathy and respect as they passed by.

Two groups of people on the towpath for two very different reasons, yet brought together through the grief of a murder victim's loved-ones. A terrible tragedy that happened on a path that has provided so many others with pleasure, yet so much pain for the Sarniak family and their friends. Channahon grieves with them for a senseless crime that will forever change what people will first think of when they hear about the I&M Canal trail.

Michael Sarniak was 48 years old, husband to Rose and father of Michael Jr., David and Tim. Sarniak had been coming to the Channahon area for years, at least 20 according to Mary Ellen Sarniak, who is married to Michael's brother Rick. "It was his home away from home," Mary Ellen remarked. He spent

time fishing in the canal, hiking and biking along the towpath and collecting bugs. He was a genuine nature lover.

Michael worked as an express clerk at the postal distribution center in Aurora. He had been there for 29 years. Michael and Rose met at work; they married and merged their two families into one. Michael loved all of his sons; he was a good family man.

After the last of the runners passed them by, the Sarniak's and their friends walked the trail to the Arrowhead Community Center and placed more pictures of the unidentified man on car windows. Later they drove to the Empress and Harrah's Casinos, the colleges and the Joliet train station, and did the same. They are trying to cover as much ground as possible, hoping that someone will come forward with information about the murder. Over the past several weeks they have distributed more than 3,000 flyers.

The Sarniak family has contacted America's Most Wanted, hoping for coverage of Mike's murder on the popular television show. They have received word that the story is being forwarded to the show's producers for consideration. The Sarniak's would appreciate anyone sending either a note of support or a flyer of the man being sought to help encourage the producers to air the story. Write to America's Most Wanted, P.O. Crime TV, Washington, DC 20016-9126.

Channahon Police Department is continuing to follow-up on all leads. However, they aren't

releasing any information which could jeopardize the case. According to Detective Sergeant David Margliano, the leads have slowed down but the Investigations Unit is still working anywhere from 16 to 20 hours a day on the homicide. "I want to put this guy away for the rest of his life and I plan on doing that," said Margliano. "It's a drop everything kind of case. I haven't had a day off (since it happened). I have over 18 years in investigations and I'm not planning to lose yet. If I sound a bit arrogant, it's because I have to be. If an investigator isn't a bit arrogant, he wouldn't be doing his job. I have to believe that I'm better than him (the perpetrator) and I'm going to get him. I have to be better and smarter."

Mike Sarniak was an all-around nice guy. A favorite of the kids in the neighborhood, he would help them build ponds in their yards and stock them with creatures he would find. He collected bugs, Gardner snakes and turtles. He rescued baby birds in need of help. He taught neighborhood children, as well as his own, to fish. Channahon was one of the places he would bring them to learn. Rose Sarniak recalls once instance not too long ago. She and Mike were returning from work together and they drove through the forest preserve at Argonne. Suddenly Mike stopped the car and pointed to a caterpillar trying to get across the road. He sat patiently which the creature made its way part the car. "That's the gentleness of him," said Rose Sarniak. "He was an honorable man, a role model for many people. He still is a wonderful person in my heart," she said choking back tears.

At his funeral, lines extended around the block. Grief counselors who were sent to his workplace had to counsel all of the employees. He was known and liked by everyone, his widow said.

Mike Sarniak was buried in a place befitting to his personality and lifestyle. One cemetery in the town he lived has a pond with willow trees growing around it. Mike was buried next to that pond, under the willow tree. A branch has fallen and floats in the pond. Turtles come out daily to sun themselves on that branch.

The Sarniak family and friends selected the following poem, that they feel describes him best, for his funeral card: "Loving and kind in all his ways, upright and just to the end of his days; Sincere and true in his heart and mind, a beautiful memory he left behind. He had a nature you could not help loving, a heart that was purer than gold; And to those who knew him and loved him, his memory will never grow cold."