

COP GONE BAD ADOPTS NEW LIFE IN PRISON

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It wasn't greed that led Ben Bennett from one side of the law to the other. All he wanted out of dealing drugs, he says, was an extra \$240 a month -- money to cover his child-support payments.

The money alone wasn't important enough for Bennett to risk his career, his honor, everything he had worked to achieve. Other things ruled his life -- excitement, resentment, a hunger for power.

Ben Bennett knew the risks -- and the lures -- of dealing because he was a cop. The reigning "Officer of the Year" in Tamarac. The president of the local Police Athletic League. The department's representative to city council.

But it wasn't always this way for him. In his previous 11 years in uniform, Bennett had worked for four other police departments in Broward County -- never staying more than 18 months and often leaving on the advice of his superiors. But he kept coming back.

Partly, he says, it was to show up his ex-bosses. And partly it was because he loved the cop's life.

He loved the uniform. He loved the excitement. He loved the gun and the badge and all that goes with them.

He loved these things more than he hated the rules and regulations, red tape, paperwork and politics that also come with the job.

He might not have been the best cop ever to come out of the police academy -- but he was determined to stay a cop. For a while, anyway.

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Today, as the cop gone bad waits in prison for an early parole in July 1986, he speaks a lot about recognition and how he never got it -- until it was too late.

"I think the turning point may have been when I won 'Officer of the Year' in 1981. I never even got a write-up in the newspaper about it. All I wanted was a little recognition, and there was no publicity, nothing. I was very hurt by that."

Bennett, 39, wears blue prison fatigues bearing the name of another inmate. A huge cross dances across his chest as he fidgets in a straight-back chair in a supervisor's office at Martin Correctional Institution near Indiantown.

He's getting out next year -- after serving four years of a 15-year sentence. And in what he calls his first interview since his arrest, he says he wants people to know he's changed.

"I'm a prison minister now," said Bennett. "I was saved Sept. 5, 1982 -- four days after my arrest. I worked as a prison chaplain at my last prison, got two scholarships to ministries in Ohio and Michigan.

"One of the reasons I was transferred here (to Martin Correctional) is because at my last prison, I came to the aid of a prison lieutenant during a scuffle with an inmate. And that doesn't make you too popular with the other inmates.

"I've done a lot of good since I've been in prison, and I want that known. So much has been said about me that's not true."

What has been said is Bennett was a cop turned pusher, a cop who gave guns to juveniles to use during holdups.

Like many other Broward County law enforcement officials, Sheriff Nick Navarro remembers Ben Bennett. Back on Sept. 1, 1982 -- when Bennett was arrested and charged with 10 counts ranging from drug dealing to conspiracy to commit armed robbery -- Navarro was head of the sheriff's Organized Crime Division, the agency that nailed Bennett.

"He was dealing drugs to kids," Navarro said. "He made statements to our undercover officer that he wouldn't deal to adults because they could be used as informants. Our officer made several purchases from him posing as a high school student and it was determined he was dealing in the schools. He had given weapons to juveniles to be used in crimes.

"He was a police officer. He had a responsibility to himself and the public. When you're a police officer, you don't become a dope peddler or any other kind of criminal."

A two-month investigation yielded tape recordings of him setting up deals, sales to an undercover detective posing as a high school dealer and a hefty stash of drugs found in his apartment during the arrest, along with an extortion note to another dealer.

"Before I was arrested, sometimes I would sit in the squad room and visualize being arrested by the guys I worked with," Bennett said, staring out a window. "When they arrested me, I recognized the undercover detective who set me up and congratulated her. It was a great bust."

Tamarac Police Chief Joseph McIntosh refused to discuss the arrest or anything about Bennett. They had worked together in the Fort Lauderdale Police Department, from which Bennett was forced to resign after flunking his probation period.

McIntosh knew of Bennett's track record at Fort Lauderdale, Coconut Creek, Coral Springs and BSO -- where Bennett was employed twice. He knew of the reprimands, the citizen complaints, the warnings in the captain's office, how Bennett twice had gotten involved in internal politics and each time wound up on the losing side. But he hired him anyway in 1980.

The next year, Bennett got a Medal of Valor, a few commendations, "Officer of the Year" and his share of influence. And that's when he said he started dealing.

"The chief was from Fort Lauderdale and I was from Fort Lauderdale and the rest of the guys resented that," Bennett said. "They didn't like me, and I was getting paranoid. I thought they wanted to see me hurt.

"I was doing a good job, but I wasn't excited. At the same time, my ex-wife's lawyer was garnishing my wages for \$240 a month because I fell behind in child support.

"So one day, I fronted \$125 to buy an eighth-ounce of cocaine. I never even saw the coke, all I did was put up the money. I made a \$25 profit. I used to hear stories from guys I drank with -- guys I went to high school with -- telling me how easy it was. It was easy. And it was exciting. And I needed that excitement."

More deals were made, and business grew. Bennett said he moved from the money man to the guy who cut down the cocaine. He said he had an ex-Green Beret as a roommate and bodyguard. A small network of underdealers. Semi-automatic weapons. After his arrest, one official labeled him "a major supplier of drugs to schoolchildren."

Bennett contends he never went big time.

"I was selling marijuana, coke and Quaaludes, but I was never the big-time drug dealer they said I was. I only made \$5,000 total from dealing and never handled more than an ounce (of cocaine) at a time.

"They said I dealt to school kids. No way. I never stepped foot in a high school to deal. I went to Stranahan, and I wasn't about to deal in my alma mater.

"They set me up to teach me a lesson. I started my career working the Broward Jail and I was returning there in handcuffs."

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Prison is not a good place to be a cop, even one gone bad, but Bennett said he has adjusted to it.

"Most inmates don't know I was in law enforcement because I have usually been segregated from the rest of the prison population," he said. "I'd have a few run-ins, but it hasn't been as bad as I thought.

"When I first was incarcerated, my cellmate was a former Parkland officer serving time for manslaughter -- a guy I knew -- so it wasn't bad. I've been in four prisons now, and there's a surprising number of former prosecutors, judges, police officers -- even one former DEA agent -- serving time. And most of the time, it's for drug charges."

Bennett said he is polite to guards, keeps himself and his dorm clean and does his work. He calls himself a "model inmate," and officials at his current minimum-security home seem to agree.

"He's a good inmate and causes no problems," said Lt. Lawrence Wenkler, a supervisor at Martin Correctional. "And from what I understand, he's been that way in the other prisons."

And when he gets out next summer, the new Ben Bennett says he will preach the gospel on the evils of cocaine.

"Anything I can do to stop the flow of cocaine into this country I will do," he said. "It's destroying this country. I've seen it in here, I saw it when I was dealing. I shamed my family and my friends because of it."

Bennett says he has changed in prison. And he wants everyone to know it.

"I think my whole downfall was because I was looking for recognition. Deep down, I'm still looking for that recognition. I want to prove I can do good."

Meanwhile, a mother waits. She has visited her son frequently while he has been in prison, often to deliver Bible study tapes. She says she knows Bennett is sincere when he says he is a changed man.

"I'm his mother," said Louise Croft. "I know him better than anyone."

A room waits for Bennett in her aging two-bedroom home in northwest Fort Lauderdale. Yellowed newspaper clippings about his arrest and trial wait in a drawer. His "Officer of the Year" and other awards stand on a bureau.

"He's had job offers from two attorneys to deliver subpoenas -- nothing where he wears a gun," she said. "Up until his arrest, he never had a speeding ticket. Police work was his whole life."

But this time, he won't go back to it. He promised his mother in a recent letter she holds for inspection.

"I know that you always hear about people finding God while in prison, but it's no fake now. This is between him and God. He is a changed man."

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