

MAUREEN DOWD

Rhapsody for a Boy in Blue

Jan. 29, 2022



By Maureen Dowd

Opinion Columnist

Maureen Dowd Get an email as soon as Maureen Dowd's latest column is published. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

We don't hear much about good cops these days.

Their stories get lost amid the scalding episodes with trigger-happy, racist and sadistic cops.

The good ones get tarred with the same brush, even though the last person who wants to get in a squad car with a bad cop is a good cop.

It takes a catastrophe, like 9/11, or an attempted coup like Jan. 6, or a heartbreaking funeral with a sea of blue, like Friday's ceremony at St. Patrick's Cathedral for the murdered 22-year-old New York City police officer Jason Rivera, to remind us that we should be proud of good cops even as we root out bad ones.

"There shouldn't have to be a funeral to acknowledge how valiant they can be in the face of danger," Chuck Wexler of the Police Executive Research Forum told me.

My heart aches for the families of good cops whenever I see "ACAB" (All Cops Are Bastards) graffiti scrawled across urban landscapes.

Growing up, I went through another period, in the '60s, when it wasn't cool to be proud of anyone in uniform and when graffiti about "pigs" was common.

When you're related to a police officer, there's always a hum in your brain, one you try to block out but never can, that when they leave in the morning, they might not come home.



Image

Thousands of police officers accompanied the body of Officer Jason Rivera to St. Patrick's Cathedral on Friday. Credit...Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

My mom was terrified that my dad, a police inspector in charge of Senate security, was not coming back on March 1, 1954, the day four Puerto Rican nationalists pulled out guns and sprayed bullets from the spectators' gallery above the House floor. Five representatives were wounded. My father ran over from the Senate and wrestled a 38-caliber pistol from one of the shooters.

My brother Kevin, then in second grade, was traumatized by my mom's terror as she stood in the kitchen, frozen, before she got word that my dad was OK. "Your father is in a shooting," she told Kevin.

I thought about this listening to Dominique Luzuriaga, Officer Rivera's widow, give her eulogy through sobs.

"You know, it's hard being a cop's wife sometimes," she said. They had a fight the day he died. She didn't want him to be on the phone for work so much. But he was excited to be a police officer, so excited that on his first day at the station in Harlem, [he double parked](#) in front and caused a traffic jam.

He epitomized what we want in an officer — full of compassion and joy, with an infectious smile. His older brother, Jeffrey, remembered Tata, as his family called him, stripping down to his tighty-whities as a child to do Latin dances.

Rivera was the mirror opposite of the brutal Derek Chauvin. As Jeffrey recalled, "My brother was afraid of heights, he was afraid of rats, he was afraid of dogs." But he "was not afraid to die to wear that uniform."

Officer Rivera and his 27-year-old partner, Wilbert Mora, died answering a 911 call from a mother in Harlem who said her son had verbally threatened her. They walked down a hall in the apartment and the son jumped out and opened fire, fatally wounding both officers.

In a [letter](#) to his commanding officer in 2020 titled "Why I Became a Police Officer," Rivera said that the relationship with the police in the neighborhood he grew up in, Inwood, on the northern tip of Manhattan, "was not great."

"I remember one day, when I witnessed my brother being stopped and frisked," he wrote. "I asked myself, why are we being pulled over if we are in a taxi?" The incident bothered him. But when he saw the force changing and trying to reach out to the community, he wanted in. Writing about "this chaotic city," he said "something as small as helping a tourist with directions, or helping a couple resolve an issue, will put a smile on someone's face."

He loved cop shows and food, and he loved his wife. He was the class clown, but he got a serious crush on Dominique in grade school. Teachers had to sit them apart so they could focus.

When she complained that fateful day and they bickered, he offered to give her a lift and said to her, "It might be the last ride I give you."

“I said, ‘No,’” she recalled, and fetched an Uber instead. “And that was probably the biggest mistake I ever made.”

When she was called to Harlem Hospital, she said, “Walking up those steps, seeing everybody staring at me, was the scariest moment I’ve experienced.”

Standing by her dead husband, wrapped in sheets, she told him: “Wake up, baby. I’m here.” In the eulogy, she often talked directly to her husband, as though he were standing at her side: “The little bit of hope I had that you would come back to life just to say ‘Goodbye’ or just to say ‘I love you’ one more time had left. I was lost. I’m still lost.”

When they wheeled Rivera out of the hospital in the freezing cold a week ago Friday, to be placed in an ambulance to go to the morgue, his body was draped in an N.Y.P.D. flag and police officers were standing vigilantly, silently. The only sound was a police helicopter whirring overhead. Officers there said they were stunned when the eerie silence was broken by the wailing of Rivera’s mother.

“My boy, my little boy, come home to us, my little boy,” she keened over the body. Tough cops dropped their heads, their faces wet with tears.