

Father refuses to give up in son's death

Police keep trying to solve 2004 murder

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By **Brendan McCarthy**

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From his home halfway across the country, Dave MacLellan writes letters and works the phone, calling cops, reporters and Crimestoppers.

He doesn't want his son's years-old Lakeview murder overlooked in an overwhelming homicide caseload.

"I realize there were 200 plus murders last year," MacLellan, 65, said from Massachusetts. "I understand you have to deal with today's issues first, and yesterday's issues next.

"But it's my son. It's hard to let it go."

MacLellan's son John, 38, came to New Orleans in 2001, a bartender with a job at a popular steakhouse. Each night, he carried cash away from work.

On one of those trips, July 16, 2004, at about 2 a.m., a man with a gun approached MacLellan at Bellaire Drive and West Harrison Avenue in Lakeview as he was walking home. The man demanded money. MacLellan said he had none, and the man shot him, police said.

Wounded, MacLellan called 911 and described his killer: a heavyset man with a blue bandanna, red cap and a white T-shirt. For two months, MacLellan lay in Charity Hospital, a family member always at his bedside. Family members rotated in and out in an endless routine of flights and hospital stays.

On Sept. 23, more than two months later, MacLellan died.

Police had no leads in the case, said Darlene Cusanza, executive director of Crimestoppers. Eventually, the killing moved to the cold case section of the NOPD's homicide unit.

MacLellan said he called homicide on a weekly basis. They always listened. He wrote letters. They always responded. Last year, MacLellan flew to New Orleans.

"I wanted to come down here and meet these people, talk to them in person, tell them I appreciate their work," he said.

Months ago, MacLellan visited New Orleans again to meet with police and Crimestoppers.

The case, a tough one from the beginning, was made more difficult by the 2005 flood. Few people returned to the neighborhood near the scene of the murder. "The trick," veteran homicide Detective Erbin Bush explained, "is to refresh people's minds and get them to call in."

Bush, the lead detective on the case, theorizes that in nearly every homicide in the city, someone witnesses something.

"And we need that person to come to forward," he said.

The officer and the father chat via telephone about twice a week.

"He's persistent," Bush said. "But he's also hurting. He lost his son to a violent crime. And it's my job to try and give the family some resolution."

MacLellan credits the police with persistence. "But like me, they can't get blood out of a stone," he said.

Bush agrees that some cases are harder to crack.

"You just keep chipping away and chipping away til you finally turn that one stone that will give you the info you need," he said.

Right now, investigators are seeking someone who may have heard or seen something on that night in July 2004.

Meanwhile, a father in Massachusetts continues to make phone calls, and hopes his son's murder weighs heavily on the mind of his killer.

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Brendan McCarthy can be reached at bmccarthy@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3301.