

## **Friendly, professional Colleagues remember fallen officer's soft side**

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**Pine Lake** Mayor Greg Zarus was a bit surprised when he introduced his adopted son to police Officer Francis Ortega. There was no sense of official reserve or distance when the 200-pound police officer, an imposing figure with a shaved head, met Yuri, a 6-year-old from Kazakhstan who arrived in **Pine Lake** in January. "He actually leaned down and hugged Yuri," Zarus recalled. Yuri referred to him with a Russian word meaning "friend."

The words "friendly" and "professional" came up often as the mourning began for Ortega, who was shot and killed during a traffic stop Aug. 11. Authorities said the man who shot Ortega, identified later as Cedric O'Neal Gordon, 31, ran into the **Pine Lake** post office and killed himself. Gordon was wanted for a probation violation in Wisconsin, authorities learned later.

Ortega, 25, worked part time in **Pine Lake** in addition to a job as a corporal in the police force at Georgia Regional Hospital, a state mental hospital in south DeKalb County. He left a 6-year-old son, an 18-month-old daughter and a fiancée. Other survivors include his parents and a sister. A funeral was held Tuesday. His family members plan to bury Ortega in their homeland, the Dominican Republic.

The shooting erupted in broad daylight during routinely heavy commuter traffic through **Pine Lake** on Rockbridge Road. Megan Keiper said she saw police cars conducting what looked like a traffic stop at the post office when "I started hearing gunfire." She then saw a woman running away from the post office toward officers who were taking cover behind squad cars. Inside the post office, postal truck driver John Strock was behind locked doors with several other employees. They heard bullets shatter glass and smash into the metal post office boxes. "We didn't know where to go. We just hit the floor," he said. When the shooting stopped, Strock peeked out and saw the gunman lying in a pool of blood. He went out the back door of the post office to tell police it was over.

Georgia Regional Hospital police Chief Gloria Boyd said Ortega "was a leader among his peers." "His ambition was to become a federal agent with the FBI, and he was slowly but surely working towards that goal, earning the hard-won experience he knew he would need," Boyd said. "No one who knew him had any doubt that if that were his goal, he would eventually reach it." Ortega worked as a guard at state prisons in Jackson and Griffin, beginning in 2001. Last year, he graduated from the 10-week police officer training program at Clayton Regional Law Enforcement Academy, where Lt. Jeff Nelson remembered him as "a good recruit. "He was always quiet, very respectful, well-mannered, disciplined. . . . You always had the impression he had a lot of pride in himself and he took his job seriously," Nelson said. At the academy, recruits get almost daily training emphasizing possibly lethal confrontations. The paramilitary program

also makes heavy physical demands, and Nelson said Ortega "was in real good shape. "Nelson noted that when officers relax their guard, it is usually five to seven years out of the academy. With Ortega's training fresh in his mind, Nelson said, "I don't see that being a factor in this case."

Aid to Ortega's family began almost immediately. The Georgia Sheriffs' Association donated \$2,500 to his family. DeKalb Sheriff Thomas Brown, who delivered the check, said, "We hope that this contribution will make a difference in some way to Officer Ortega's family. "A Sunday night community dinner also raised \$2,500, organizers said. Donations also are being accepted at all Wachovia bank branches. Donors should specify the Francis M. Ortega Memorial Fund. Because Ortega was killed in the line of duty, his survivors also may be eligible for about \$250,000 in benefits from the U.S. Department of Justice.

-- Staff writers Bill Montgomery and Jeffry Scott contributed to this article.

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