

Cote's stepmother retires as federal agent to focus on family and volunteer work

Nightmare followed by DEA retirement

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Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News file photo

Nancy M. Cote served as agent in charge of DEA office in Buffalo during stepson's hostage ordeal.

Day after day, month after month, Nancy M. Cote went to work, supervising high-profile narcotics raids and investigations for the U. S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

As she concentrated on her job, she struggled to tune out all her questions and worries about her stepson, Jonathon M. Cote, who was being held hostage by terrorists in Iraq.

“There were many times when I was glad I had my job to think about,” she said. “If not, I probably would have sat around at home and gone into a deep, dark depression.”

Cote retired last week as resident agent in charge of the DEA's Buffalo office. She leaves with mixed emotions. At age 52, she said she still enjoys the work but needs a rest.

“I love my work and especially the people I work with, but I've been through a lot over the past two years,” Cote said. “I want to use at least the next year to spend time with my family and concentrate on some volunteer work with our church and Habitat for Humanity.”

The Buffalo native went through some difficult times during her career as a federal drug agent, but nothing she saw as a cop ever compared with the nightmare she, her husband, Francis L. Cote, and the rest of the family experienced after her stepson was abducted.

An Army veteran of the Iraq War, Jonathon Cote was working as a security contractor in Iraq when he was kidnapped in November 2006. Over the next 17 months, he was held hostage, tortured and ultimately murdered before his body was recovered in Iraq last April. He was 25.

American investigators in Iraq are still trying to determine who killed Cote and four co-workers, and why. That tragedy put the Cote family through an emotional wringer.

“My brother [Russell Burgstahler] died last year, and then we had all this with Jonathon. The past two years have made me realize how fragile life can be,” Cote said. “As I’ve said many times, our strong Christian faith and our good friends helped us to survive it.”

Widely respected in local law enforcement, Cote is known for her sense of humor, her no-nonsense style and a resilience that has amazed some of the cops and prosecutors who work with her.

“It’s astounding to me, that with all she had to deal with, she was supervising several major investigations, working with all kinds of local police agencies, doing excellent work,” said U. S. Attorney Terrance P. Flynn. “Nancy is a federal prosecutor’s dream — a humble, honorable person who is able to bring other people together. She’s also a mentor and great role model to younger federal agents.”

Cote joined the DEA in 1980, a time when women agents were still a rarity in the federal drug agency. Before that, she had graduated with a degree in criminal justice from Buffalo State College and worked for three years in the State Liquor Authority.

“The DEA began operations in 1973, and I was the 50th woman to join it,” she said. “[Agents] never babied me. I had to prove myself. I am not the cute, demure type looking to be babied. I’m pretty self-assured.”

She spent the early years of her career working in Buffalo and New York City. She later worked in Quantico, Va., and Atlanta before coming back to Buffalo for good in 1997.

Earlier in her career, she was often called upon to work undercover — posing as a criminal while she made drug buys. She estimates that she has made at least 70 undercover buys.

Although she is not a deceptive person by nature, deceiving drug dealers as an undercover cop did not bother Cote. She said drug addiction has destroyed lives in Buffalo and every other community where she has worked.

“I know that I never convinced someone to sell drugs for their first time in their life,” Cote said. “These were people who already sold drugs before I started investigating them.”

Cote worked on many major drug cases in Western New York and one in New York City that was turned into “American Gangster,” a major motion picture starring Denzel Washington. That was the investigation into Leroy “Nicky” Barnes, a vicious Harlem drug kingpin who became a DEA informant in the early 1970s, providing information that resulted in dozens of convictions.

Cote’s major cases in the Buffalo area included drug busts aimed at several violent street gangs in Buffalo, a drug-trafficking organization in Jamestown and another that sold dangerous prescription drugs to teenagers and young adults in the Southtowns.

“One thing I am proud of is the working relationship that we have built up with the local [police] departments all over Western New York,” Cote said. “We work with these people and share the credit with them when we have some success.”

But one chapter of her DEA career is painful for Cote to talk about. In the 1990s, she said, she was sexually harassed by two male supervisors — one in Buffalo, another in Atlanta. She filed a federal lawsuit that she said was settled in her favor in 1994.

“The vast majority of men I’ve worked with in the DEA have been family men, men of integrity who I was proud to work with,” she said, “. . . but there are still a few men in police work who think women don’t belong.”

When she joined the DEA, she was aware of few, if any, women in supervisory positions in federal law enforcement agencies.

That situation has gradually changed. Buffalo just had Cote as its DEA supervisor, and Laurie J. Bennett as the special agent in charge of the FBI office.

In addition, the DEA’s acting administrator— Michele M. Leonhart, a good friend of Cote’s — is a woman.

“Years ago, Michele and I used to talk about our goals. We both wanted to return to our hometowns someday as the agent in charge,” Cote said. “Michele got to run the whole DEA. I got to run the Buffalo office. I joke with her that I’m the one who got what I wanted.”

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