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Trooper's tortured spiral;

Death in wreck ends 'bag full of problems'

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The crash split the truck in two and threw Todd Cardoza's body clear of the wreckage.

Clear of the wreckage - and free of the contradictions and downward spiral that in four years poisoned what once was a promising career for the suspended state police trooper.

The Genesee Township resident was a high school dropout from a Boston ghetto. An elite U.S. Army Airborne Ranger. A trooper who loved traffic duty but died in a high-speed crash after having a few drinks.

He was a 43-year-old father to eight kids who preached discipline but lied to commanders and filed false police reports.

When he died March 25, he was under investigation in a man's death, on trial for trying to buy crack cocaine and the loser in a lawsuit that cost the state \$45,000 in a settlement.

"He had a bag full of personal problems that he carried around with him all the time," said Genesee County Undersheriff James Gage, who supervised Cardoza in the early 1990s. "But he did seem to do his job."

Humble roots

Cardoza's early life and career gave little hint of trouble.

He started humbly, raised by a single mom, grandma and uncles. A 10th-grade dropout, he joined the U.S. Coast Guard in 1979 after earning a GED. During his career, he helped rescue some of the more than 124,000 refugees who fled Cuba in the early 1980s.

He left the Coast Guard in 1982 and worked odd jobs before joining the U.S. Army more than a year later.

During a three-year stint, he became a Ranger and served as a machine gunner and a weapons specialist, training other soldiers. He received an honorable discharge and, in December 1987, joined the Michigan State Police and was assigned to the Flint post.

Some troopers specialize in fighting drugs or fraud. Cardoza liked traffic duty and investigating child molesters, said friend and fellow Trooper Aimee Brimacombe, 31.

"Who knows how many children's lives he saved, that he got out of abusive homes," said Tammy Binkley, one of Cardoza's ex-wives.

He stood out with his heavy East Coast accent: He was a troopa. Last name Cahdozah.

He was 5 foot 8, 150 pounds, but didn't back down from anyone. He was blunt, a hard case to strangers: A man who met his second wife during a traffic stop - and still wrote her a ticket. He knew jujitsu and drove a candy-yellow Harley-Davidson Fat Boy with a graphic of a topless woman and barbed wire on the fender.

Cardoza shaved his head, earning the nickname "Q" - short for "cue-ball."

Brimacombe considered him a brother.

Cardoza mowed her lawn and was an unofficial repairman.

On days off, he shuttled her blind mother to appointments around town.

"I don't see Todd as perfect," Brimacombe said, but "he was a perfect friend."

Cardoza kept advancing through the ranks, to Detroit in October 1989 and, a year later, winning a prized job in Livonia.

He was assigned as a canine handler to the state police Narcotics Interdiction Team, part of the Central Investigation Division.

Gage, who commanded the CID before retiring from the state police to join the sheriff's department, said members of the narcotics team are screened for drugs when they arrive and

when they leave.
Cardoza was clean.

Troubles creep closer

The breakup was messy.

Cardoza's first wife, Gina, filed for divorce in August 1989. They would spend the next 15 years fighting for custody of their son and daughter, Genesee County Circuit Court records show.

"They are really good people who, I'm convinced, truly love these children," a court referee wrote in 1994. "But their 'garbage' is spilling over into the lives of the youngsters."

Cardoza, meanwhile, married a second time - in 1991 - and three years later transferred to the Owosso post.

The second marriage fell apart in 2001, and cracks began to show in Cardoza's career.

"He acted with his heart instead of his head and forgot he had a badge on his chest," said Binkley, his second wife.

In 2001, Cardoza's superiors started scrutinizing his performance.

Personnel records show he drew five internal-affairs complaints between August 2001 and March 2002 - ranging from insubordination to claiming he made a traffic stop on a driver who was actually in Florida at the time.

Five sustained complaints are more than most troopers amass in a career, state police spokeswoman Shanon Akans said.

Off-duty fightBut it was Cardoza's off-duty conduct that led to a federal civil rights lawsuit.

On Sept. 25, 2002, Cardoza intervened in a fight between the son of his girlfriend at the time and a group of teens near a Durand party store, according to U.S. District Court records.

Cardoza drove to the scene and confronted the teens.

"Which one of you little bastards punched (him)?" Cardoza yelled, records show.

Cardoza grabbed a bystander, Daniel Komarowski, 15, and either kneed or punched him and threw him against a truck, according to records of the case.

"You're not going to get away with this," Komarowski said later.

Cardoza grabbed and pushed Komarowski, who fell down.

"Now I've got you for assaulting a police officer," Cardoza said, according to court records.

When a part-time Durand cop arrived, Cardoza told him to arrest Komarowski, according to the lawsuit.

In May 2003, Komarowski sued Cardoza and others in U.S. District Court.

Komarowski alleged the trooper filed a false police report that incorrectly blamed Komarowski for punching the son of Cardoza's girlfriend.

The lawsuit also claimed Cardoza used excessive force and detained Komarowski without probable cause, among other things.

Cardoza denied hurting Komarowski, who the trooper said resisted arrest and assaulted him.

Life-and-death struggle Before that lawsuit could be resolved, Cardoza would end up in trouble again, in late fall 2004.

Now patrolling from the Brighton post, Cardoza responded on Thanksgiving to a bulldozer parked on U.S. 23 in Hartland Township.

According to details in investigative reports filed by the state police and Livingston County Sheriff's Department, Cardoza approached the bulldozer's driver, Charles Keiser, 47, of New Hudson, as he tried to enter a front-end loader parked in the median.

Keiser ignored Cardoza's order to stop and mumbled something before running away.

Keiser, who relatives said was acting paranoid and mentally unstable for weeks, kept running until Cardoza tackled him near a swamp.

By now, Trooper Greg Galarneau had arrived and both troopers tried to handcuff and subdue Keiser.

But he resisted, freed one hand and started choking Galarneau, reports show.

Galarneau couldn't break Keiser's grip. Neither could Cardoza. Galarneau's face turned red, then blue.

"(I) felt my life was threatened," Galarneau wrote later in his report.

Cardoza grabbed a collapsible baton and whacked Keiser's forearms and thighs, distracting Keiser enough to let Galarneau grab pepper spray and blast Keiser in the face.

Keiser let go and fled into the swamp. Three Livingston County Sheriff's deputies arrived and helped corner Keiser in knee-deep water. Again, he ignored their commands.

One deputy fired a Taser gun, but Keiser only flinched. Two deputies and Galarneau then tackled him in the water. He kept resisting and a deputy fired the Taser at least one more time, records show.

Keiser twice plunged his own face below the water, each time for at least three seconds as Galarneau and a deputy tried to subdue him. Each time, a deputy yanked Keiser's head back above water.

During the final struggle, Cardoza noted in his report that he stood eight feet away from Keiser.

Galarneau managed to handcuff Keiser, who was breathing when he was dragged out of the swamp, reports show. But he stopped breathing a minute later and died.

A medical examiner labeled Keiser's death an accidental drowning. Tests found traces of marijuana in his system.

Independent autopsy results released last week said the Taser would have "enhanced the drowning process."

Livingston County Prosecutor David Morse is trying to determine if Cardoza or the others contributed to Keiser's death.

Lawyers hired by Keiser's family question whether Cardoza was honest about his role.

"He either partook in the killing of Keiser or stood idly by," said attorney Thomas Present of Constitutional Litigation Associates in Detroit, which is representing Keiser's family. "Either one is a violation of (Keiser's) civil rights."

Present also questions whether Cardoza was under the influence of drugs at the time.

"They'd love to say (Cardoza) was drug-addled and a menace to everybody," said Sgt. Michael Herendeen, a former colleague and president of the Michigan State Police Troopers Association. "He's dead. He's not there to defend himself."

Stripped of badge
Three months after Keiser died, as the civil lawsuit tied to the Durand beating progressed, Cardoza's career collapsed.

He was arrested Feb. 17 and charged with conspiracy to possess less than 25 grams of cocaine, a 4-year felony. His bosses put him on unpaid suspension.

Two co-defendants who took plea deals testified Cardoza gave them cash to purchase crack cocaine while he was on duty.

State police had Cardoza and the others under surveillance for a short time after hearing from an informant, according to police

reports.

"If you look at the facts, there was nothing," said his widow and third wife, Kim Cardoza. "He was not this monster, like he had a drug habit or was a drug dealer. He didn't do those things."

One of Cardoza's co-defendants told police that she was trying to deliver crack cocaine to him, according to Cardoza's lawyer, Matthew Stewart. All accounts indicate his use of the drug was a recent problem.

"I think the job started getting to him," said Binkley, his second wife. "People take for granted what these guys do and see everyday. Seeing people shooting themselves in the head, bodies mutilated and torn in half. People abusing kids, sexually assaulting kids. I think his release was partying."

At the time Cardoza was arrested, the Michigan Attorney General's office was defending Cardoza in the civil suit and prosecuting him on the drug case.

The two cases were handled independently, said Allison Pierce, spokeswoman for Attorney General Mike Cox.

But 13 days after the drug arrest, a motion was filed in U.S.

District Court indicating the Attorney General's office was willing to settle the Durand beating suit.

Cardoza's involvement cost the state \$45,000, a settlement a U.S. District Judge Gerald Rosen approved March 10.

Cardoza had 15 days to live.

The crash

After being suspended, losing the civil lawsuit and being investigated for the U.S. 23 drowning, Cardoza studied his options.

"Todd was very well aware that his life was about to take a really drastic turn," said Brimacombe, who had limited contact with Cardoza after he transferred to Brighton in 2003 and knew nothing of his drug use.

He filed for retirement two days before he died and landed a job installing siding, friends said.

On March 25, a Friday night, he had been drinking with acquaintances before heading home, said Saginaw County Sheriff's Detective Sgt. Wil Yancer.

The officers smelled alcohol when they found the crash site along eastbound Peet Road near Sheridan Road in Maple Grove

Township, he said.

Investigators are awaiting toxicology reports that could show the exact level of intoxication and whether Cardoza had drugs in his system, Yancer said.

Rumors aside, friends doubt Cardoza purposely crashed the car. A car crash is a dicey suicide.

He was speeding, about 80 mph in a 55-mph zone and hit a tree sideways, not head-on.

And when investigators looked down at the ground to learn how Cardoza died after a years-long decline, they found he'd put on the brakes.

Skid marks.

"I think he knew he had hit bottom," Brimacombe said. "He wasn't able to see that he could have gotten past this."

Journal staff writer Ken Palmer contributed to this report.