

Dueling Detectives: Private dick Dan Riemer says he solved the murder of Broward County Sheriff's Office Sgt. Chris Reyka — no thanks to the Sheriff's Department detectives

Homicide detectives are close to solving the murder of Sgt. Chris Reyka, one of their own. Broward Sheriff's Office investigators have suspects in the highly publicized case: a gang of armed robbers with a terrifying penchant to hit 24-hour drugstores in the middle of the night. They have the motive:...

By Bob Norman
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Homicide detectives are close to solving the murder of Sgt. Chris Reyka, one of their own.

Broward Sheriff's Office investigators have suspects in the highly publicized case: a gang of armed robbers with a terrifying penchant to hit 24-hour drugstores in the middle of the night.

They have the motive: Gang members are believed to have shot down Reyka when the 51-year-old father of four happened upon them about 1:30 a.m. on August 10 of last year behind a Walgreens in Pompano Beach.

But there's a key piece of evidence eluding authorities and stalling the investigation: the gun.

Detectives were once hopeful they would recover it. In December, deputies searched a canal where four guns believed to have been used by the gang were dumped. Only three were found. Detectives determined that none of them had been used in the murder.

The missing weapon has caused the case to languish for months. And if new information coming to light is correct, they'll never find the gun, at least not in one piece.

Private eye Dan Riemer and local lawyer **Joe Pappacoda** have learned that the gun was broken into pieces and disposed of in several locations, according to a source with knowledge of the pair's investigation into the case.

It's one of the more startling findings in a case Riemer and Pappacoda claim to have solved. To prove it, Pappacoda and Riemer have filed civilian arrest warrants for the alleged killers with a local judge. It's an almost unheard-of measure, and it has ignited a turf war in the year's most highly publicized Broward murder.

And it may all have more than a little to do with the whopping \$267,000 reward offered in the case.

Pappacoda and Riemer have fingered suspected Walgreens robber Gerald Joshua, known as “Dread” on the street, as the triggerman, according to my source. With him was Timothy Johnson, the 34-year-old alleged leader of the gang. At least one other gang member was nearby in a second vehicle, a PT Cruiser.

The pair’s affidavit is reportedly full of details that appear to solve the case. One might consider the work of Pappacoda and Riemer a public service, but when I broke the story about it last week on the *New Times* website, it was met with derision by deputies, including **Sheriff Al Lambert**, who is up for election November 4.

The efforts of Pappacoda and Riemer quickly became a flashpoint in the already-heated sheriff’s race between Lamberti and Democratic challenger **Scott Israel**.

Lamberti called the idea that BSO wasn’t getting the job done on the case a “personal insult.” Sheriff’s spokesman Jim Leljedal called it a “publicity stunt.” He says deputies have taken their own case to the State Attorney’s Office, where it was decided they needed more evidence to make an airtight case.

“We don’t just want an arrest in this case,” Leljedal says. “We want a conviction.”

Riemer says he has more than enough to convict. And he says politics was the last thing on his mind. The ferocity of Lamberti’s response caught him a bit off-guard. “Should I move now?” Riemer asks. “I have done nothing to thwart their investigation except to file a paper in private with a judge. And I was well within my rights to file that. I firmly believe I have probable cause to do what I did.”

Whatever one thinks of the civilian tactic, Riemer shouldn’t be taken lightly. The former Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office deputy is a veteran P.I. with solid footing in the law enforcement community. He’s no fly-by-nighter, and neither is Pappacoda, who served as both an agent with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and a statewide prosecutor before going into private practice.

Pappacoda became involved in the case when he was appointed defense attorney for Consuela Jones, who was charged in December with evidence tampering for allegedly helping to hide the guns used by the Walgreens gang. Pappacoda hired Riemer to investigate the case as part of Jones’ defense.

To counter the charge that his case is somehow political, Riemer points out that he is, like the sheriff, a registered Republican. He says he has known and liked Lamberti for years, having worked with him on a loosely organized smuggling task force in the 1980s. He says he even sent

Lamberti a congratulatory note last year after his appointment and offered to help him in the coming election.

Riemer claims he has never met Israel, Lamberti's opponent, though he did work with the Democrat's father, Sonny Israel, at PBSO. He says he found the father to be one of the most dedicated deputies on the force.

"I don't know who I'm going to vote for," Riemer told me. "But my allegiance is to the lawyer who hired me. My allegiance is to the client. And my allegiance is to the Reyka family, who deserve justice in this case."

Yes, but the prospect of the reward — and with it credit for solving the case — has surely helped ignite this high-stakes conflict between BSO and the lawyer/P.I. team.

Riemer acknowledges that he and Pappacoda have put in for the \$267,000 reward with Crime Stoppers. They have yet to hear back from the nonprofit organization, which operates out of the sheriff's office.

Riemer downplays the influence of the money. He says that long before he filed the affidavit, he and Lamberti met with lead investigator Dave Nicholson about the Reyka case. He declined to reveal what occurred during the meetings, but he said he shared some information and ultimately didn't hear anything back from BSO.

In other words, there wasn't the kind of cooperation one might hope for during such a sensitive and important murder investigation. And though Riemer downplays the possible reward payoff, the prospect of it was surely hovering over the meetings.

Another point of contention may have involved the Jones case. Leljedal confirmed that BSO is offering her no deals for cooperation in the case.

Jones, a nail technician who works in a salon and lives in Coral Springs, has denied she had anything to do with the guns. Jones' half-brother is the half-brother of the gang's leader, Timothy Johnson.

I reached Jones, who has bonded out of jail, and she declined to comment on the case. "I'm not going to say anything, and I don't know anything," she said.

She described her interrogation during a January 30 bond hearing, saying that two detectives tried to extract a confession from her. She claimed one of the detectives "looked like he might have drunk a little." They were unsuccessful: Jones denied any involvement with the guns and said she didn't know of any link between Timothy Johnson and the Reyka murder.

“I’m not this huge criminal I’m being made out to be...,” she said during the hearing. “I’m being railroaded.”

While investigating the case, Riemer took numerous sworn statements and gathered what he says is more than enough evidence to convict the killers. In addition to the dismantling and disposal of the gun, my source says:

- Riemer established that the suspects had secured the use of a white sedan from an area car lot shortly before Reyka’s murder. A surveillance camera caught the killers speeding away from the scene of the crime in a white sedan, believed to be either a Crown Victoria or a Grand Marquis. BSO saturated the media with photographs of the car, but the vehicle has yet to surface.
- The P.I. culled details about the crime from associates of the gang. For instance, Riemer learned that gang members were changing into their black robbery masks when Reyka approached. Riemer was told the number of shots that were fired and where Reyka was hit.
- One associate claimed that Joshua, the 28-year-old alleged shooter, said he had killed “a cracker” shortly after Reyka’s murder.

History will tell if Riemer and Pappacoda made the right move in filing papers with the court, but there’s no question it’s an extraordinary measure. Florida law has no mention of civilian arrest warrants, Reimer says. Such arrests are, however, allowed under English common law, and Florida statutes dictate that such laws, so long as they don’t conflict with the U.S. Constitution, are “of force” in the Sunshine State.

The duo’s probable-cause affidavit has been a hot potato at the courthouse. Riemer and Pappacoda initially filed their affidavit with Circuit Judge Cynthia Imperato. She bowed out of the case last Thursday, handing it to fellow Circuit Judge Ilona Holmes.

Holmes didn’t hold the probable-cause affidavit very long either. Last week, it was transferred to the most powerful figure at the Broward County Courthouse, Chief Judge Victor Tobin. Conceivably, Tobin could order arrest warrants if he believes Pappacoda and Riemer have proven the case.

But don’t count on it. Such a ruling would be a hard slap in the face to Lamberti and BSO. I don’t see Tobin making that move, whether it’s warranted or not. What needs to happen, obviously, is for all parties to put the squabbling aside and use every shred of evidence available to put away the killers. That might just lead to justice for Reyka’s family and Broward County.

Then let the credit — and reward — fall where they may.