



The parents of David Cotto, who was killed by police in Brooklyn last year, protest brutality.

Metro

Freddy's Dead

Latinos Call for an End to Brutality After the Pereira Killing

By Ed Morales

As a chilly March wind came off the East River and whipped through the rally at Police Plaza, they told their stories: David Cotto's father described how in March 1990, his son had quarreled with a neighbor. Shortly after police arrived at 5 a.m., his son had threatened to kill himself, putting two knives in his throat. Cotto said the cops sprayed the young man with mace and shot him 11 times. The mayor and police commissioner promised Cotto's family an investigation; none happened.

Mark Rodriguez, a 27-year-old accountant from Flushing, recalled being beaten by two policemen in front of his wife and child. Now, his wife has left him for fear that the police would come back to kill him. "My life has practically been destroyed," he said, carrying a placard with photographs of his beaten face and torso. "Sometimes I wish he would have killed me."

The list went on: Rafael Jimenez, Luis Liranzo, Jose Lebron, Andrew Gonzalez, all men alleged to have died at the hands of the police.

The rally, organized by the National Congress of Puerto Rican Rights, was prompted by the February 5 death of Federico Pereira, the 21-year-old Latino who died while being arrested in Forest Hills. The day of the rally, five police were indicted in Pereira's death, charged with manslaughter, assault, and second-degree murder.

Importantly, Latino New Yorkers broke their silence about police brutality. Emerging from anonymity like the families of the Argentine *desaparecidos*, victims and supporters showered the press with a litany of police abuse, showing just how far anger, mistrust, and downright terror have become embedded in the community.

Finally, Laura Pereira-Nieves, Federico's mother, spoke. "I never thought I'd be standing up here," said Pereira-Nieves, her face show-

ing the strain of the day. "If you have children, let me say this: I never thought it could be mine. Tomorrow it could be yours."

Freddy Pereira's life began in tragedy. His father died in a car accident before he was born, in Fort Hood, Texas, after his second tour of duty in Vietnam. Never having had the chance to meet his father would haunt Freddy until his fatal encounter with an anticrime unit at the 62nd Drive playground.

His mother had managed to move them into a safe, middle-class apartment building in Forest Hills near 108th Street, far away from her rough upbringing in Brooklyn's Marcy projects. Freddy and his mother were pioneers of Forest Hills's integration, which began in the area around the infamous housing project, the one which touched off much protest in the mid-'60s, almost costing then-mayor John Lindsay his job.

Freddy grew up with friends from all ethnic backgrounds, bright, curious, bilingual, and with a thing for the sciences. When his mother met his stepfather, the burly, husky-voiced salsa singer Tito Nieves, Freddy, then 11 years old, was precocious enough to say that she was "falling in love with the guy on the cover of the records."

As he entered adolescence, Freddy, compared with his fellow Puerto Ricans across the city, lived a relatively privileged life, riding dirt bikes, fooling with the

Atari 400 computer his parents bought him, and finding the love of his life, Nicky Olivo. Olivo, peeking out from her long black curls and waving her fingers, is the quintessential Nuyorican girl next door.

From across a table at a burger joint on 108th Street, she mused, "We met in this very diner. Once I started going out with Freddy, I realized that I was Latin and that maybe I shouldn't be hanging out as much with all white kids."

Their relationship flourished, but Freddy began to show trouble signs. Steve Polano, a teacher of his at Halsey Junior High School, felt that although Freddy "had a certain leadership quality, he was not sure about what he wanted out of life and how to go about achieving that." Freddy began to hang out with an unsavory crowd on 108th Street. "There is a problem with drug dealing and fences on 108th Street," said Polano. "Young people are able to turn over radios and things like that for quick cash."

As Olivo struggled to graduate from Forest Hills High, Freddy dropped out, content to get his GED. Then Nicky got pregnant. Freddy went to learn welding at the Technical Careers Institute in West Haven. Nicky went to live with him there until he finished the course after four months, when they moved back to their respective apartments.

After Federico Jr. was born, Nicky decided to go to college. But Freddy didn't seem to be able to adjust. "I think the shock set in

when Rico was born," Nicky recalled, "that, look, this is your son, and you're his father, and now is the time to stop everything and do the right thing."

As he got older, Freddy became increasingly haunted by the fact that he had never known his father. "He would tell me that if he had one wish it would be just to speak to his dad," sighed Nicky, her voice trembling, "and to see what kind of person he was."

By mid-1989, Freddy was floundering. He moved with his parents to Edison, New Jersey, where he slipped back and forth between the world of work, doing construction or being a cook at fast-food joints, and the world of drugs and stolen car radios of 108th Street. Finally, in the spring of 1990, after a car-theft arrest earned him a short stay at Riker's Island, Nicky cut him off. "He always wanted to go back to Nicky," said Sean Creden, one of Freddy's best friends, "but he realized that she didn't want him back."

A few weeks before his death, he spray-painted a wall at Alexander's near Queens Boulevard: "Freddy Loves Nicky."

Just what Freddy was doing on the night of his death is still a mystery. Creden thinks he may have simply gone to sleep in a stolen car after an aimless coke binge. Freddy may not have gone home because his mother was in the hospital having an operation.

"While he was doing it [drugs]," Creden said, "he was very quiet and very to himself. He felt bad about what he was doing. He almost felt like he had to do it

and he couldn't stop. He'd stay awake for a couple of days, and then go back home and sleep."

So Freddy probably binged out, fell asleep in a car he may have stolen or just broken into to get some sleep, and wound up smashed practically beyond recognition. "His eye was out like he had been in the ring with Tyson," said Tito Nieves, after identifying the body. "Busted completely."

The factors that fueled Freddy's descent into drug use and petty crime were not complex: adolescent confusion, the loss of his father, pressure from being an adolescent parent. Since he was instilled with a strong Latino identity, his bonding with a "bad crowd" may have been the result of the lack of Latino peers in his own neighborhood. But his missteps into drug dependency and nonviolent crime shouldn't have ended up in a brutal death.

"Betty Ford had a problem with drugs, but she's okay," lamented Freddy's mother. "White kids were in gangs and joyriders in the '50s and '60s and that was romantic. When Puerto Rican kids do it, they're animals."

Referring to news reports that she had Freddy arrested for stealing her air conditioner, she said, "I thought it would be a way to help him get rehabilitation."

Police, who refused to comment for this story, maintain that the five officers now under indictment are not guilty of homicide.

But an autopsy report called Pereira's death a homicide and said he died of "traumatic asphyxiation." Said Queens County district attorney John Santucci in

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Urban Guerrilla Lucette Lagnado

Friends in High Places

The \$200,000 Man and His \$128,000 Hires

Dr. Emilio Carrillo and Victor De La Cancela were best friends. And they were ex-roommates and co-investors in a Boston real estate venture. When Carrillo became president of the city's Health and Hospitals Corporation last year, De La Cancela's job was about to be phased out. Carrillo was able to lend a helping hand. He hired his friend last April, and in June, created a new \$128,000 job at his cash-strapped agency and gave it to Victor De La Cancela.

De La Cancela, a clinical psychologist and author of several seminal papers on machismo in the Latino male, rose meteorically through the ranks of HHC. Within two months, Carrillo had given his friend two promotions and a \$38,000 raise. The post of senior vice-president in charge of community health had never existed in New York City before Carrillo conjured up the job and awarded his old pal the highest salary.

As the *Voice* reported two



Mark Rodriguez with photos of wounds he says cops caused.

...when it came time to draw a couple quotes out of the presentation, she went cold, understanding that the same Cuomoista impulse that drives him to cheat at basketball in games with the statehouse press corps could also make him strip the social service programs in question a little barer on the chance he'd not had his dose of Thomas More on the day his eyes caught an unflattering quote.

Times have changed. Now, the week that his budget is due to be settled with the state legislature, he's being rapped from his left and wrapped within the right, most of whose main spokesmen have applauded his priorities. Cuomo's basic position, that he will brook no revenue measure and that austerity must rule the day, puts him on a collision course with his traditional support network. "Cuomo's budget is an insult to citizens of New York," ran the headline over a column by city union leader Stanley Hill in the March 8 *Public Employee Press*.

Hill writes that "the governor's explanation of the budget gap is based on three big lies. The lies are: 1) State spending is out of control, 2) There have been huge tax increases in the past two years, and 3) Corporate taxes are already too high." He goes on to say that state spending has actually dropped, as a percentage of personal income, in each of the last three years, and that despite the tax increases of the last two years, the effect of previous tax cuts

page will take his side against the mayor, and the giveaways will thus be forced. But that's precisely my point—Cuomo operates wholly by political calculus, not by the high moral standard his reputation would have you believe.

And what's the condition of the state over which he presides, and in which he proposes his new austerity? A Fiscal Policy Institute study provides appropriate context. In New York State today, about 2.6 million people live in poverty, and 2.5 million have no health insurance. New York has the third-highest adult illiteracy rate in the nation, and ranks 45th in the proportion of high school students who reach graduation. Obviously, a lot of this stems from problems that go well beyond the scope of one budget, but Cuomo's intentions, and the ideology that underpins his decisions, are clear.

Which returns us to the quote that introduced all this. Mario, so they say, is drumming his fingers deciding which speaking engagements to accept around the country to denounce George Bush. Around the country, they don't know him beyond the San Francisco speech, so he can go to California or the South and get away with denouncing Republicans, even as Republicans in New York State applaud him. He has it both ways, which is exactly how he wants it: Consider the situation if he can complete the fissure with New York liberalism by, say, next spring: The

Hispanic press, and me; I say this not to toot my own horn, but because, after months of futile efforts to get them interested in the caucus's position, the caucus has quit inviting the rest of the white press) to tell their side of the story. Cuomo argues that the caucus supported the 1987 tax cuts and thus has no right to complain; but seven of the total 11 votes in the legislature against those tax cuts came from caucus members, so they actually opposed the cuts in far higher proportion than their colleagues. Cuomo has launched a massive PR campaign in the black media, attacking the credibility of black legislators. We, Vann said, have supported him in the past, and now he won't even talk to us to discuss our ideas. "The debate he asked for is now occurring, and he doesn't seem to want to debate," Vann said. "The last I knew, we didn't elect dictators."

The disillusionment, the disgust with Cuomo in poor and minority communities, is profound, and any white or upper-class person who feels reassured upon reading in a newspaper that Cuomo "has demonstrated admirable fiscal responsibility" needs to contemplate that statement's underside. The last word goes to state senator David Paterson, who said at Monday's news conference: "When the rich involve themselves in the problems of the poor, it's called charity. When the poor involve themselves in the problems of the rich, it is always characterized as anarchy." ■

Morales

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a press conference the day of the indictment: "Choked is the word."

Like Richard Luke, who was allegedly beaten by an enforcer known on the street as Robocop (see "Did the Cops Kill Richard Luke?" *Voice*, July 11, 1989), Freddy was possibly the victim of a police goon squad.

The 108th Street Boys, a multi-ethnic crew, know all about goon squads. Teenagers hanging out on

the commercial strip complain of being swept off the block, sometimes violently, by precinct patrols.

"Every once in a while around six o'clock they come by in a Bronco and start kicking everybody off the street," said a crew member. "One time they dragged me into an alley and beat me and said if I showed up on 108th Street again they'd arrest me."

Tom Stickel, the lawyer for the Pereira family, is a 15-year army veteran. He got involved with the

case because of his shock over the Jose Luis Lebron case and his disgust with errant cops, not because of any civil liberties or a pro-Latino political agenda.

Asked if goon squads existed, Stickel answered emphatically: "You bet. They're in Bushwick, they're in Queens, they're in the Bronx, they're in Manhattan. It's Rambo cops, it's the middle of the morning, they figure no one's ever gonna catch 'em and they get their jollies out there. They're gone-wrong guys."

Dennis Sheehan, spokesman for the Police Benevolent Association, calls Stickel's remarks "absurd," saying, "he probably made them because he doesn't have much of a case."

Regardless of the outcome of the Pereira case, a fire has been lit in the Latin community, which has come to realize that the mounting cases of brutality against it are intolerable. The stark videotaped image of a black man being beaten in Los Angeles has created a

new climate, which has given hope to a community whose anguish has been ignored.

The determination on the faces of the demonstrators that afternoon at Police Plaza was proof positive that Freddy Pereira hadn't died in vain.

"It's time we put a stop to this, and it's time to do it now," shouted Gerson Cotto to the hushed gathering, and warned: "We won't rest, Mayor Dinkins, Commissioner Brown. We won't rest until it's over." ■

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