

# Highway patrol officer receives award for arrest

By GREG TUTTLE  
Of The Gazette Staff

It was more than a hunch that led Montana Highway Patrol Officer Toman Baukema to three Arizona murder suspects last January, but not much more.

Baukema was parked in his patrol car in the median of Interstate 90 monitoring traffic flow through Billings on Jan. 15 when he saw a slow-moving passenger car heading west. The slow speed of the car, the 1985 Chrysler's out-of-state plates and its young-looking occupants raised the officer's suspicions.

Within a few hours, Baukema's hunch had helped solve a murder three states away.

On Wednesday, Baukema was recognized for his role in helping lead Arizona law enforcement authorities to the murder suspects.

MHP Col. Paul Grimstad presented Baukema with the award issued by the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office in Phoenix, Ariz. Grimstad said the recognition is important because many people believe that state patrol officers only write traffic tickets and investigate accidents.

"To me, this (award) goes to show the type of people we have in the Highway Patrol ranks," Grimstad said.

Baukema said he was one of many people involved in the early stages of the murder investigation. He credited a patrol dispatcher with persuading him to check into the case further before releasing the suspects who, at that point, were considered only runaways. In the next few days, Baukema said, other patrol officers helped cover his duties while he concentrated on the murder case.

As soon as it became clear the man and his two teenage cousins were more than runaways, the Yellowstone County Sheriff's Office and the County Attorney's Office also helped build the case and ensure that the suspects would be properly charged, Baukema said.

Three Yellowstone County sheriff's detectives and a records clerk also were presented certificates from the sheriff's office in Arizona. County Attorney Dennis Paxinos and Deputy County Attorney Rod Souza received similar certificates.

Maricopa County homicide detective Brad Dunn said he asked for the certificates because the help he received from the Billings area law enforcement was invaluable in solving the murder case. "You have a lot of good people up there," he said.

The slaying last Jan. 9 of Pedro Corzo, a food company executive, remained a mystery until Baukema stopped the suspicious car on I-90 in Billings, Dunn said. Corzo had been shot to death and his body buried in a shallow grave.

"We had no leads, none at all, until I got that phone call" from Billings, Dunn said.

Justin Harrison, 23, and his cousin, Joshua Aston, 17, have been charged in Maricopa County Superior Court with first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder. Joshua Aston's brother, 15-year-old Nicholas Aston, was charged as a juvenile, but the charges were later dismissed in exchange for his cooperation, according to the Maricopa County Attorney's Office.

Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty against Harrison and Joshua Aston. A trial is scheduled for July 28.

In January, officials said the three suspects were reported as runaways from Missouri and were believed to be armed. When Baukema stopped the car driven by Harrison, he found three firearms in the truck. At least one of the firearms was later connected to the slaying.

But the break in the case came when the younger teenager told Baukema about a shooting in Arizona while they were waiting at the MHP office in Billings. At the time, Baukema was trying to contact the teens' parents in Missouri to tell them their sons had been located in Montana.

Baukema said he is gratified to have played a role in the arrests of the suspects. It will be among the memorable events of his career, he said.

"Sometimes you find things, you turn over a few rocks and find things you weren't expecting," he said. "This is one of those cases."

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