

30TH ANNIVERSARY OF A FALLEN HERO'S DEATH

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National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund

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His name is Eddie Byrne—an icon in the annals of New York City law enforcement. In the early morning hours of February 26, 1988, this 22-year-old police officer was assassinated while he sat in a marked police cruiser in South Jamaica, Queens.

Eddie was guarding the witness in a narcotics case and his murder was ordered by a jailed drug lord who wanted to strike fear in New York City's police officers. But, the murder of Eddie Byrne had just the opposite effect. It was a seismic event that galvanized the police, the politicians and the public like no other.

War was declared on the gangs and the drug dealers, who until that time operated with impunity. As New York City Police Commissioner James O'Neill declared at a ceremony commemorating the 30th anniversary of Eddie's death, "It was a war we could not afford to lose." In the end, the drug trade was decimated and the killers of Eddie Byrne and their associates lost bigtime.

Just consider that at the time of Eddie's murder there were some 2,000 homicides each year in New York City. Last year there were fewer than 300. The overall crime rate in New York City is now at the lowest level ever recorded. The New York City police and anyone else around in 1988 will tell you that the assassination of Eddie Byrne was the catalyst for this dramatic change.

On February 21, at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral, a Memorial Mass was held in Eddie's honor. It could have been held on February 26, the 30th anniversary of his death. But, instead, the family wanted to hold it five days earlier, which was the 52nd anniversary of Eddie's birth.

It was truly a celebration of a short life that had far reaching impact. St. Patrick's Cathedral was packed with law enforcement officers, dignitaries and grateful citizens—most of whom never knew Eddie Byrne. They heard Commissioner O'Neill declare, "This city, this nation, are far safer places now because of the sacrifice Eddie made and the work he inspired."

Timothy Cardinal Dolan looked out at the large gathering and observed, "It's clear to me this morning that never, ever will we forget Police Officer Edward Byrne. We remember him with fervent love, honor and prayer."

Eddie's brother, Larry Byrne, is now NYPD Deputy Commissioner for Legal Matters. He spoke with great emotion and eloquence at the Mass about his late brother. He pointed out that a street outside the 103rd Precinct is named in Eddie's honor, along with a school in the Bronx, a park in Queens and a sports stadium in his Massapequa hometown. And, he noted that

the NYPD German Shepherd sniffing for explosives outside St. Patrick's Cathedral was K-9 Eddie, named in honor of his brother.

Larry said he and his family were especially proud of the Byrne Justice Program started by President George H.W. Bush in Eddie's memory. The program continues to this day to provide millions of dollars for police training and equipment. "I often think if one officer's life is saved, that's a pretty big accomplishment," Larry said of the program.

Larry said that all of this, plus the fact that Eddie's death has been termed a "tipping point in history," makes his family extremely proud. He said his brother lived "a life of meaning. That's a life to be proud of."

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