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The Buzz

The Buzz blog features Atlanta celebrities, filming news and interesting people and events around town.

He used to solve crimes. Now he cleans up after them.

By [Jennifer Brett](#)
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Pat Apoian wore a badge for 14 years. This is what his uniform looks like today. Photo: Jennifer Brett, jbrett@ajc.com

The man shot his wife first. Then himself.

When cops arrived they found the murdered woman in a chair. Her husband's body was on the sofa nearby. The living room was a tragic tableau.

Atlanta Police Det. Pat Apoian was among the responders. As he and his colleagues processed the scene, he thought about what would happen once they were done. The murder-suicide wasn't much of a mystery, and after the bodies were removed, the couple's adult children would be left to deal not only with the awful deaths but the horrific mess left behind.

"These poor kids. They're going to have to clean this up," he remembers thinking.

That was in 2009, two years before the night Apoian was dragged by a car with a fleeing suspect at the wheel. The car nearly tore off his foot and left him with a broken leg and a damaged hand. It ripped his sternum from his rib cage, fractured his pelvis and spine and tore the muscle from one shoulder. He endured multiple surgeries, recovery (both mental and physical) was painful and slow, and he ended up retiring from law enforcement.



Then Det. Pat Apoian during an appointment at Northside Hospital-Forsyth on Feb. 21, 2013, nearly two years after suffering life-threatening injuries on the job. AJC photo: Bitia Honarvar

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In contemplating his next chapter, Apoian, who has a young son and daughter, wanted to put his background to work in a new career that would allow him to keep helping people. He and his wife, Sandra, have become **Spaulding Decon** franchisees. The firm specializes in environmental cleanups, responding to crime scenes, hoarding situations, mold or other biohazard contaminations – even meth lab mitigation.

“I feel like I’m still helping people,” he said. “I want to show up and make an impact.”

Just before Thanksgiving, he and his employees helped a distraught Roswell woman reclaim the holiday. Meredith Wilbanks had what she thought was a dripping sink. In fact, her dishwasher had been steadily leaking for who knows how long, and dangerous black mold was creeping along the inside of her kitchen island and cabinets and underneath her tile and carpet.

"I was really, really stressed," she said. Not only was her house a wreck, but the thought of having to celebrate the holidays elsewhere this year left her in tears. Her father died in a car wreck in January, and spending the holiday season at home with family felt more vital than ever this year.

"To not be able to have Thanksgiving and Christmas here, I was panicked," she said, her eyes welling up as she remembered how much her dad loved family gatherings this time of year. "He was all into Christmas."

Wilbanks' mom learned of Apolian's company through a friend in a grief support group.

"I talked to him about his story and I told him about my dad," Wilbanks said. "I feel like it was meant to be."



Pat Apoian helped a distraught Roswell resident reclaim the holiday season this year. Photo: Jennifer Brett, jbrett@ajc.com

A Long Island native with family and friends in blue, Apoian seemed born for the badge. Residents of Atlanta's Zone 6 grew to know him as a guy interested in keeping the peace but also in getting to know them.

"He's concerned about people. He talks to people," Darrell White once told us when we were walking the beat with Apoian in 2013, before he retired. "It's hard to find officers like that."

Apoian used to fold his 6-foot frame into a library chair for story time at the elementary school in his zone, and once patiently “investigated” when an elderly woman dialed 911 to report terrorists had placed deadly powder in her mailbox. No ma’am, he reassured her, a bird took a bathroom break there.

“People still call me,” he said. He recently helped a crime victim navigate the system to report an assault. That suspect is now in jail. A different victim called Apoian for guidance in handling things after his home was burglarized. “I still feel connected.”



Story time at Toomer Elementary School in Kirkwood on Feb. 4, 2013. AJC photo: Bitá Honarvar

A case his company worked a few months ago reminded him of crime scenes he used to process. The client owned rental property she hadn't visited in a while. Her tenant turned out to be an extreme hoarder.

"We found six decomposed cats," he said. "Everywhere you can imagine there was cat mess. The showers, the tubs, the sinks, the countertops. The garbage was piled up on the porch, on the back deck."

In responding to the nightmarish scene, Apoian drew upon the empathy he developed on the force.

"I always look at it as trying to see what was invisible to everybody else. Was there something there no one could see?" he said. "If I would see a prostitute I would think, 'What got her there?'"

He took a non-judgmental approach to the hoarding case, and it has a happy ending. The home's back to normal.

Apoian hasn't responded to a death scene yet but grimly notes that it's just a matter of time. He is, unfortunately, well-prepared, having responded to countless homicide, suicide and unattended death scenes. It's hard to say which is worse.

"If it's an unattended death your body basically melts. You literally melt into the floor boards," he said. "God forbid it's a self-inflicted gunshot wound."

He didn't want to give a lot of details about what that's like, but recalls the gentle approach he would take to dissuade family members who wanted to see for themselves.

"You want to keep the family out. You're keeping them from that being the last memory," he said. "It adds a whole new level of heartbreak."

He misses police work but still lives up to the ideals he upheld after joining the Atlanta Police Department in 2002. As a New Yorker who lived not far from the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, he'd actually thought of joining the military. His wife put an end to that plan, so Apoian instead decided to follow the example of his childhood mentor Bill Murphy, a Nassau County, N.Y., police officer who'd led fundraising efforts for the Police Athletic League.

Apoian pinned on his badge with Officer Murphy's mantra in his mind, and he stays true to it today: "Always be remembered for the good that you do."



AJC photo: Bitá Honarvar

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