

Wreck kills Jal chief

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HOBBBS NEWS-SUN

Luis Castillo will long be remembered around the city of Jal for his wit, his professionalism and his courage.

Many of his closest friends and coworkers awoke Friday morning to learn that Castillo, who served as Jal's police chief since 1989, had been killed during the night.

Castillo was on duty at the time of his death.

While the New Mexico State Police has not yet com-



Castillo

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pleted its investigation, a few details are known.

Castillo, along with other Jal Police Department officers, were working drug interdiction patrol at about 10 p.m. Thursday night. Patrolman Larry Burns pulled over a motorist on State Road 18 and Castillo, patrolling State Road 128 at the time, was coming to Burns' assistance.

The police chief then lost control of his squad car, which left the roadway and overturned about 20 miles west of Jal.

Another officer, Adam Montez, came upon the accident scene moments later and spotted Castillo's overturned car — which had crashed through a barbed wire fence — in a field next to the road.

Castillo was taken to Winkler Memorial Hospital in Kermit, where he was pronounced dead around midnight.

Law enforcement is like a large brotherhood, and Lea County law enforcement is no exception.

"Police officers aren't one department," said Burns. "They're one large family."

Officers across Lea County remembered Castillo fondly.

"He was a good person, a good moral person and a pretty dang good officer," said Tatum Police Chief Phillip C. Watson.

Watson said the phone call notifying him that a brother officer had died awakened him from a sound sleep but "I didn't sleep no more."

Watson wasn't the only one who spent a sleepless night after learning of Castillo's death.

Hobbs Police Chief Tony Knott also received a phone call about Castillo's death around midnight.

Knott remembered Castillo as a well-liked and admired officer, and as one who cared about the brotherhood of peace officers.

"In Lea County we really take a teamwork approach to law enforcement ... and Luis has always been a big part of that team," Knott said. "And I tell you, we are really going to miss him."

Knott says Castillo's death in a way illustrates his dedication. Castillo was working a routine drug interdiction mission when the accident occurred.

"Here he is, the chief of police, and he's out working late at night. ... You don't get much more dedicated than that," Knott said.

Friday morning, Knott and several other representatives from the Hobbs Police Department paid a visit to both Castillo's family and the Jal Police Department "to let them know that if there is anything they need the Hobbs Police Department will help," Knott said.

Eunice Police Chief Fred Johnson also received the same terrible early-morning phone call telling him of Castillo's death.

"It was a big shock. You think, what a way to happen ... to lose an officer in a vehicle accident. You don't think it happens that often, but it happens probably as often, or more, than (officers) going down from gunshots," Johnson said.

It won't only be his comrades

who will miss Castillo. His friends and other city employees also say they considered him a compatriot and friend.

Jal Mayor Claydean Claiborne said she was notified almost immediately, receiving the phone call around 10:30 p.m.

"It was just total disbelief," Claiborne said of her reaction on being notified of the chief's death.

Claiborne says she will always remember an incident with Castillo that occurred shortly after she became the new mayor of Jal.

Claiborne gave a speech at a meeting of city officials and employees where she let it be known that nobody would receive special treatment while she was mayor.

"That was one of the things we talked about. Everybody is the same, nobody gets treated different," Claiborne said. "And two days later I ran a stop sign and guess who was there?"

Castillo, of course.

Castillo wrote the newly elected mayor a ticket, saying "Mayor, you didn't even tap your brakes."

Claiborne said she paid the ticket, adding, however, that Castillo never ceased teasing her about it.

"I'm going to miss that," Claiborne added. "He wasn't just a dedicated employee. He was a good friend."

Burns met Castillo when the chief hired him nine years ago. He and Castillo became especially close — working on restoring a 1968 Camaro Castillo owned.

"He was one hell of a man," Burns said. "(And) he was a hell of a friend."

Burns remembered Castillo as a gentle person who was understanding of others and "wasn't quick to get angry."

The chief was an outdoorsman, Burns said, but had given up hunting.

"He liked to shoot, but not animals," the patrolman said, explaining that Castillo had given up hunting for wildlife photography.

Burns and City Clerk Skeet Posey remember Castillo as a highly intelligent man who could help other people solve problems they had long given up on.

"He was a problem solver," Burns said. "He could not only figure out a problem for you, but guide you to figure it out on your own."

Burns also said Castillo wasn't just good at police work, but was a true Renaissance man who excelled at many things.

"You couldn't put him into one category," Burns said, "because he was so good at everything."

Castillo leaves behind his wife, Rosie, three children — and four grandchildren.

Services for Castillo will be at 10 a.m. Monday at the Jal High School Auditorium. Deacon Gerald Anderson from Church of Christ in Jal and the Rev. Michael May from Church of God in Jal will officiate. There will also be a visitation from 7:30-9:30 p.m. on Sunday at the auditorium.

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Saturday, Aug. 4, 2001
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