

East Palo Alto to name park after slain officer

Area is much improved since shooting

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It took a long time, but East Palo Alto finally has a spot to remember the one police officer to die on its troubled streets.

East Palo Alto police Officer Joel Michael Davis was killed in the line of duty on June 22, 1988.

Today, 14 years to the day after his parents buried his body, Davis will be remembered when a brand-new park is dedicated in his

name in a city neighborhood far different from the drug-laden one in which he died.

The ceremony will begin at 1 p.m. at the park, located near Tinsley Street off of Clarke Avenue.

"It's a long time coming, and we're glad it happened," said Lt. Rahn Sibley, who was on the force when Davis was killed.

Davis was just 26 years old, an athletic man with deep blue eyes who had graduated from the police academy just six weeks before he was killed.

His mother, Beth Ann Davis, said her son wanted to be a police officer from the age of 14. Davis said she plans to attend today's memorial — the first time she will have set foot in East Palo Alto since her son's death.

"I still have all his Matchbox cars," she said Friday. "It would be a great collector's item, but he painted them all black and white. Convertibles, trucks, everything."

Davis could have chosen a safe and profitable career, his mother said. He worked for Hewlett-Packard before joining the force, and could have made a life there, or easily have taken over his father's machine shop in Mountain View.

But it was police work that drew him, she said.

Davis didn't have to work the day he died: He was technically off-shift and wearing jeans when another officer called for backup and he decided to take one last call.

Davis and another officer responded to Mickey's Liquors on

Bay Road where a man was reportedly brandishing a gun. They chased the man's car to Jack Farrell Park, where the suspect abandoned his vehicle and ran.

But as Davis pursued the man through the rundown park — a haven for drug dealing — and over a fence, shots rang out. Other officers found Davis sprawled on the sidewalk at Gonzaga Street.

More than 1,500 officers paid tribute at Davis' funeral. East Palo Alto resident Ronald Price, an ex-con with a record for burglary and assault who police said bragged about shooting a cop, was convicted and sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole for the murder.

But years passed before East Palo Alto raised a memorial for

the lost officer; years that left some officers and Davis' family members quietly frustrated.

"I feel like it should have happened sooner. But at least it's happening," Davis said.

East Palo Alto has changed a great deal in that time. Drug dealing and drive-by shootings led to a wave of death and fear in the early 1990s.

But Jack Farrell Park, where Davis died, was rebuilt earlier this year and now features a glittering green baseball diamond and enough playground equipment for a horde of cheering children. Home prices are on the rise and tax revenue from a new shopping center help pay for improvements, such as new parks.

The new park that will bear

Davis' name offers playground equipment along with a child care center, a long stretch of green field with a small stone monument bearing Davis' name and badge number.

The field is surrounded by some of East Palo Alto's newest homes, occupied by young families and professionals from all races — an area, police say, that reports very little of the kind of crime that took Davis' life.

"I think it's really appropriate that this park be named after Joel, because it represents the new image of East Palo Alto," Sibley said.

An image, he said, that Davis helped make a reality.

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