

Nicholas Proto '79: A Dedication To Protect and Serve

Nicholas Proto '79 had a natural instinct to protect and serve from an early age. In January of 1962, right after graduating from high school, Proto joined the United States Army, seeking a career path with “more excitement.” Following his two-year stint in the army, based in Fort Carson, Colorado, his next career step fell out of the Sunday paper: the New York Police Department (NYPD) was looking for new recruits. “They were losing World War II vets who were now retiring from the force, so they needed an abundant group,” said Proto. Proto answered that call and thus began his lifelong career in law enforcement.

His NYPD career started as an officer working the tactical patrol force in high crime areas on the night shift. “Many times I did 24 hours without sleep,” said Proto, whose beat included Brooklyn, the Bronx and areas of upper Manhattan.

Rising in the role of high intensity work, Proto would continue to be brought into even higher intensity work in the decoy division of the force. In this role, Proto pursued investigations that found him donning disguises for undercover cases. He admits there were scary moments in that line of work. He once found himself attacked while dressed as a rabbi and had to confront his assailant and arrest him. “Those were those moments that really made it intense.”

With his talent and leadership in the force quickly recognized, it became obvious to his supervisors there were higher roles Proto could seek in law enforcement. The only

thing Proto said he was missing however, was a bachelor’s degree. “Enter Mercy College,” said Proto with a smile.



Photo provided by Nicholas Proto

Living in Rockland County at the time with his wife Florence, the location of Mercy’s Dobbs Ferry Campus made the most sense. “Many police officers were doing night classes,” said Proto matter-of-factly, “It was just what you did to move up.” Graduating in 1979, Proto said his Mercy education gave his career the momentum it needed. Soon after, he would graduate from the F.B.I. Academy and continue to rise up the ranks in his career.

After having spent years battling white collar crime, organized crime and civic corruption, Proto would be tapped to work at the New York City Medical Examiner’s Office. He found that the stark setting of the morgue was one in which the realities of crime, particularly murder, became a jarring everyday reality. Proto directly

handled the autopsy investigation in the 1980 murder of John Lennon, a case which stays with him to this day.

Proto’s career would take him to a role in the Federal Reserve’s Law Enforcement Unit, where he helped shape state and federal law enforcement standards. As fate would have it, on September 11, 2001, this role at the Federal Reserve would prove particularly important, with its offices just 200 yards from the Twin Towers. “My job then was to ensure the safety of our employees working through that time,” said Proto. His commitment to his employees’ safety led he and his wife to uproot from their Rockland home, and take up residence for a year in a vacant Manhattan apartment building, allowing him greater proximity to Ground Zero.

Having retired in 2018, after having spent the last stretch of his career in the private sector as a risk management consultant, Proto admits his career allowed him a deeper look into the harder side of human nature. “I learned a very different view of the world, and it’s not always such a pretty view.” Yet, protecting others has always been something beyond his simple instinct. It’s not surprising that even tender moments in his life memories happened when he was on duty. He met his wife during the infamous blackout of 1965 when he was coordinating evacuation of the office building where they both worked. “I guess that’s a fitting way we met,” said Proto.

Today, his post-retirement life living in East Hampton is significantly quieter, by choice. Inspired by the work of artist Jackson Pollack, he’s turned his attention to painting and truly enjoys the quiet concentration—giving his artwork as gifts.

Though he keeps a scrapbook of many of his high-profile police cases, he is rarely tempted to go through them. A consistent donor to Mercy through the years, he still looks at his college education as the doorway that opened more to him than he previously imagined. “I had a career I would not have had without Mercy.”