

Alleged drug slaying rattles community - Farmington Hills case tied to Detroit cartel, officials say

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FARMINGTON HILLS ? The sprawling Independence Greens apartment complex is a world away from the life Yury Avanesov left in Russia.

Once chased down and severely beaten, Avanesov knows crime first-hand as a victim. But on June 22, a basement hallway in his suburban apartment building held more violence than Avanesov had ever witnessed in Moscow, known for its criminal underworld.

Three men hiding inside an apartment ambushed Armond D. Hickmon, the occupant of apartment No. 365, as he left for work at about 7 a.m. They shot him at least 10 times and fled. Avanesov heard the shots, then a woman's screams for help.

"This all surprise me," said Avanesov, a musician whose family lives above Hickmon's apartment. "This is something you might expect in Moscow. But not here. Here is nice. You can even walk the street at night without worry."

Authorities say Hickmon's death was the latest in a series of attacks by a violent Detroit drug cartel with suburban ties that is suspected in 11 homicides and four firebombings. Police in recent months have also raided expensive suburban homes in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, seizing cash, drugs, expensive cars and boats in association with the cartel.

Investigators believe Hickmon's killers were after his brother, who testified against drug dealers before a grand jury in October. The shooting is indeed a rarity in Farmington Hills, Oakland County's most populous city and the safest in Michigan among cities with a population over 75,000, according to a recent survey.

Avanesov, like other immigrants, moved to the United States for a better life for his children.

"We feel safe here," said Avanesov, who teaches piano in Northville. "We feel sorry for that man, but we don't worry those people will come back."

That can't be said for some of his neighbors. One family moved out the day of the slaying, and told Avanesov they feared the shooters would return, he said.

Hickmon, a 21-year-old maintenance man at a Southfield plastics company, had lived in the apartment on Jefferson Court for eight months, according his mother, Thelma Hickmon. After a packed funeral service June 30 at New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit ? where Armond had sung in the choir and served as an usher ? she said her final goodbyes and laid her son to rest in Gracelawn Cemetery.

"He was the sweetest, the kindest boy," said Thelma Hickmon. "I've asked myself time and time again, 'Why did someone have to hurt my son?'"

Thelma Hickmon acknowledges mistaken identity seems a likely reason. Her oldest son, Antoine, 31, testified before a federal grand jury investigating suspected drug dealers Tommie Lee Hodges of St. Clair Shores and Leonard Shoulders of Detroit.

In March, a federal grand jury indicted Hodges and Shoulders, claiming the two earned more than \$50 million in drug profits and distributed more than 25 tons of marijuana over the last three years. They are in custody awaiting trial.

Federal court records show the pair and other alleged members of the ring owned or controlled expensive homes in Chesterfield Township, St. Clair Shores, Shelby Township, Bloomfield Hills, West Bloomfield, New Baltimore, Sterling Heights, Clinton Township and Roseville. Many of the houses, searched by DEA agents, were worth more than \$1 million.

John P. Gilbride, head of the Detroit DEA, declined to comment for this report but said in May that drug traffickers find advantages in suburban life.

"You don't want to be looking over your shoulder to see whether you're going to get robbed, beaten up or killed," Gilbride said. "They don't want to be associated with violence that brings the scrutiny of law enforcement."

Frequently, police say, drug dealers purchase property in the names of other people to avoid drawing attention.

Authorities say Hodges and Shoulders were making \$2 million a month by shipping Mexican marijuana from Arizona to Michigan, and estimate that the total profit exceeded \$50 million.

The government said Hodges and Shoulders used homes in Detroit to distribute and store much of the marijuana. And while the pair laundered money and purchased cars, boats and land, they also helped escalate a blood feud with a rival group led by **Quasand Lewis**, according to DEA Special Agent Harry Swain, a member of a joint Detroit homicide task force.

"The task force has identified over 11 homicides and four house firebombings linked to the feud between Tommie Hodges and **Quasand Lewis**," Swain said in an affidavit.

The federal complaint also said a confidential informant told the DEA in December that Hodges and another man were offering \$30,000 to have Ivan Cannon, a rival drug dealer, murdered.

In early March, Cannon was shot and killed in Detroit.

Thelma Hickmon said after burying one son that she worries about the other, who is in protective custody. She also believes he did the right thing, despite two earlier attempts on his life.

On June 21, the day before the recent shooting, Antoine Hickmon rented a truck and drove to another state to move his family back to Michigan, his mother said. She said Antoine had been staying with Armond and left his white Dodge Intrepid with Georgia plates parked outside the apartment.

Investigators figure in a darkened hallway, looking through a small peephole at 7 a.m., the killers mistook Armond for Antoine. Twelve shots rang out in the stairway before the three men, dressed all in black, one wearing a two-tone baseball cap, fled in a Mercury Sable. The Sable, stolen out of Detroit, was found abandoned at a Red Roof Inn on Grand River.

Farmington Hills Police Chief William Dwyer hopes a \$5,000 reward and evidence found in the car and apartment may lead to the killers. His detectives are working with the DEA.

Drugs in the suburbs

- * On Feb. 23, 20 people from six states and 10 Detroit suburbs were indicted as part of a multimillion-dollar drug ring that authorities say has sold at least 40 tons of marijuana since 1991.
- * In March, Tommie Lee Hodges and Leonard Shoulders were indicted on charges they earned more than \$50 million in drug profits and distributed more than 25 tons of marijuana in the last three years.
- * On June 22, gunmen shot dead Armond Hickmon, 21, in the hallway of his Farmington Hills apartment building. Authorities suspect the gunmen had targeted Hickmon's brother, Antoine, who had testified against Hodges and Shoulders.

Caption: The June slaying in Farmington Hills shocked musician Yury Avanesov, who has a daughter, Angelina.

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