

Former hitman fears for his life

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By Francis X. Donnelly

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If **Nate Craft** had his way, he would be living under a new name in a new city far from Detroit.

Instead he's stuck in his Michigan home, peering out the window, wondering whether the next person he sees will try to kill him.

In 1994, the former hit man testified against a Detroit drug gang in return for prosecutors reducing a first-degree murder charge for the killing of a drug dealer.

Released from prison in April, Craft thought he would enter the Witness Protection Program. Not only was he rejected, but his probation requires him to live in Michigan for the next two years.

By forcing him to live in the same place as the people he testified against, many of whom were paid killers and already have been released from prison, Craft said his probation amounts to a virtual death sentence.

"You might as well pull the trigger and shoot me now," said Craft, who doesn't want to say where he lives in Michigan because he doesn't want to be found.

The handling of his case raises questions about just how far prosecutors should go to protect criminals, even murderers, who help convict other crooks, legal experts said.

Craft, 51, admits he was no angel.

He was one of the most ruthless members of the vicious Best Friends, a hired hit man who killed 30 people in the mid 1980s. He was never charged with the other deaths.

Now the tables have been turned. The hunter thinks he is hunted.

Craft's federal and state probation officers also believe he's in danger.

"He's in a situation where he's vulnerable," said George Murphy, a Michigan probation officer. "It's not surprising reprisals would be sought by others."

For Craft's safety, both probation officers visit him at home rather than make him travel to their offices.

Still, it didn't take long for Craft's old running mates to learn he was out of prison.

On his second day of freedom, he was walking out of a grocery store when a man called out his name. He turned around to spy a former accomplice.

The man said he would tell Craft's old cohorts that he was back on the street.

Witness protection denied

During his 17 years in federal prison, Craft was in the Witness Protection Program, kept separate from the general population.

Upon his release, he applied for the next phase of the program, which would give him a new name and new life somewhere in the United States.

But his request was rejected by the Justice Department, which didn't give a reason. A department spokeswoman declined comment.

Bill Soisson, an assistant U.S. attorney who supported Craft's request, said a Justice Department official told him the reason Craft was rejected was that he had told a prison psychologist he was going to blow up a federal building.

Soisson didn't know which building or why Craft made the threat.

Craft said he never made such a remark.

"Why would I say something that ignorant?" he asked. "Do I look like a fool? I ain't no fool."

If anyone thought Craft was a fool in the mid '80s, they kept it to themselves. He was an imposing figure: 6-foot-1, 300 pounds, bald and bearded, with a permanent scowl.

By age 10, he committed his first robbery, records show. By 21, he was a twice-convicted felon. By 35, he had spent nearly half his life in prison.

In 1984, Craft caught the eye of brothers Reggie and Terry Brown after winning a Toughman boxing contest at Cobo Hall.

The Browns were the leaders of a burgeoning drug gang, Best Friends, which was about to ignite a ferocious drug war in Detroit, prosecutors said.

They wanted to know whether Craft could help prepare them for the battle that would follow.

Tables have turned on Craft

Best Friends began as enforcers for drug gangs, later ripped them off and finally killed some of them, Soisson said

Its 25 members didn't know each others' names, only their nicknames: Boogaloo, Ghost, KO, Lunchmeat. Craft was known as Boone because, like Daniel Boone, he was good with a knife.

Flush with cash from the sale of crack cocaine, they drove around in Volvos, BMWs and Corvettes. They drank \$100 bottles of Dom Perignon.

Craft said he tried to instill some discipline into the gang, who often got high before attempted murders, and then go on wild shooting sprees that left holes in each other's clothes.

"They would fire 15 shots and only hit the person with one," he said. "They would be throwing their gun around and shooting innocent bystanders."

Craft taught the gang how to set up a hit by learning the target's daily travel patterns. That way, they could ambush the victim as he left or arrived at home or at work.

Dressed in bulletproof vests and body armor suits, they packed M-16 and AK47 rifles and Uzi submachine guns.

The gang killed 80 people, which included snitches, competitors, customers who owed money and sometimes family members, prosecutors said.

Members received \$10,000 to \$30,000 per murder, depending how much the Brown brothers wanted the victims dead.

If the price was right, Craft said, he would kill anyone.

But then he turned on the gang after it killed his brother over a drug debt.

During his 1994 testimony against Best Friends, Craft said the gang kept a running list of the people it wanted to kill.

"There was a whole big list of them," he said. "Half the time I wasn't paying too much attention to it. We would just go out and start popping people."

Craft's testimony helped end the decade-long dominance of the gang, Soisson said. Dozens of gang members and associates were convicted of offenses ranging from peddling drugs to murder.

When he was trying to get paroled in 2002, an assistant Wayne County prosecutor wrote a note on his behalf to the state Department of Corrections.

"He provided invaluable assistance, at great risk to himself, in achieving convictions of a number of individuals in a notorious murder for hire case in federal and state courts," wrote Bob Donaldson.

After his rejection for Witness Protection, however, law enforcement officials said there's little they can do for him.

Contacted by a reporter, Donaldson said he wasn't involved in Craft's negotiations for the Witness Protection Program and that there was little he could do for him.

Maria Miller, a spokeswoman for the county prosecutor's office, said such questions should be directed to the U.S. Attorney's Office. The county office had only worked with Craft briefly on the Best Friends case before turning it over to the federal prosecutor, she said.

Soisson, who supported Craft's bid, inquired about a possible appeal but was told by the Justice Department that the chances were remote.

"I'm disappointed," he said. "I thought he would be better off in the program."

Soisson and Miller said they didn't think Craft's rejection by Witness Protection would send the wrong signal to would-be witnesses fearing retribution from those they testify against.

They said they didn't think his experience would make it tougher for prosecutors to get other people to testify.

"Every case is a case-by-case basis," Miller said. "There's no scientific formula you can plug into every situation."

As for Craft, he now knows what it's like to live scared, to live like a snitch, the type of person he would have killed in the 1980s.

Stuck indoors, he said he feels like he's still in prison. For money, he relies on help from struggling relatives.

With the curtains drawn, he sits inside his darkened living room, watching a lot of TV. He occasionally peeks out the window, watching people as they walk by.

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