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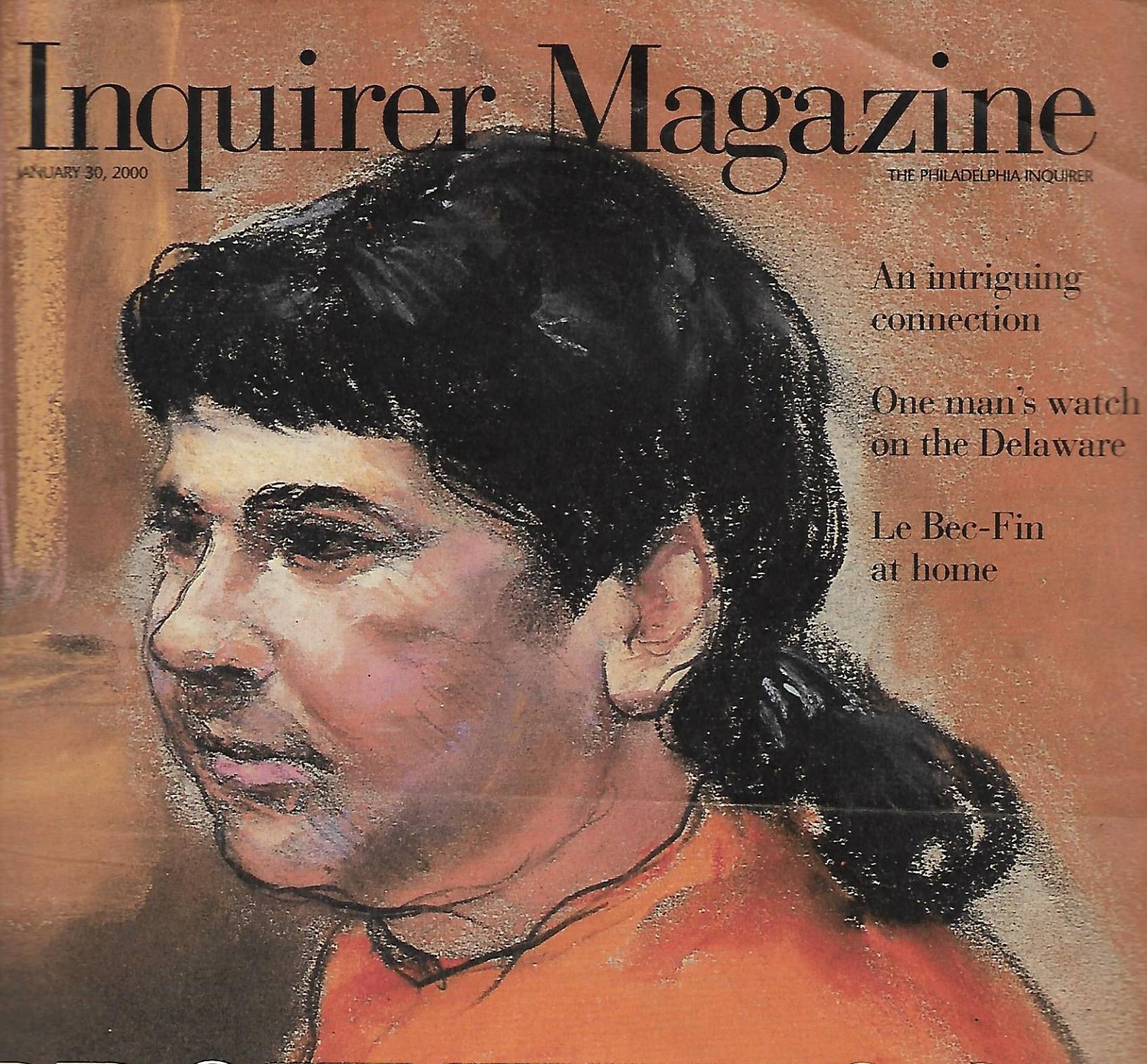

An intriguing connection

One man's watch on the Delaware

Le Bec-Fin at home

BROTHERHOOD AND BETRAYAL

How a sensational hate-crime case tore apart a friendship — and a neighborhood.

By JOSEPH A. SLOBODZIAN

ON THE COVER

Dominic Demuro, as sketched during his 1998 trial.

Illustration by Susan Schary

The house at 2517, with awnings, was vandalized. The Demuro family lived on the left, Edward Majors on the right.

Photography courtesy of the FBI

Michael Kates loved his neighborhood. But what he witnessed one summer set his loyalty against what he knew was right.

A MATTER OF CONVICTIONS

By Joseph A. Slobodzian

Five years ago and a world away it seemed the perfect seal of friendship, a friendship strengthened by loyalty in a time of crisis.

Michael Kates, a South Philadelphia trucker partly paralyzed in a workplace accident, and Dominic Demuro, his bear of a neighbor — who had cared for Kates during his recovery, fed and bathed him, built the wheelchair lift on the front of his rowhouse — got identical tattoos on their right shoulders.

They chose the ancient Chinese symbol of duality in all things: a mandala, two teardrop shapes nestled in a circle. Yin and yang, black and white, good and bad; opposites that attract, repel and finally complement each other. Their initials were incorporated in each of the tattoos.

Today, the tattoos' symbolism remains as strong as ever, in ways that Kates and Demuro never dreamed of.

Dominic Demuro, 31, sits in a federal prison in Fairton, N.J., two years into an 11-year no-parole sentence for his role in one of the most highly publicized hate crimes in Philadelphia's history.

And Mike Kates, the man who put him there, is serving an open-ended sentence in a prison of the fear only a disabled man with lots of enemies can know.

Kates, 32, who put his opposition to racism above friendship and family, lives somewhere in the United States, shielded by the government's witness protection program, but exiled from friends, siblings, parents and the world he knew.

He is haunted by the 1996 incident that led him to betray his best friend. But except for conversations with an FBI agent who keeps in touch, Kates cannot talk about his fears to anyone in his new world without compromising his family's safety.

"I have nightmares. . . . I wake up in cold sweats, breathing hard, constantly," Kates said recently in an interview arranged by the FBI. "During all this, if I slept a couple hours I was doing great. But sleep now is haunted by getting killed, getting stabbed, getting shot."

What he saw that night was a group of neighbors breaking into a two-story rowhouse across the street from his home on the 2500 block of South Franklin. What he saw was vandalism aimed at keeping a 21-year-old African American waitress named Samantha Starnes from moving in.

At trial, defense lawyers challenged Kates' motives. They suggested he'd been looking for a ticket off South Franklin Street.

Kates insists — and prosecutors verify — that he has paid his own way in his new life, buying his own house and moving his family. But the grassroots campaign against Kates has continued since the trial ended in April 1998. Anonymous callers tell reporters he's a drug addict and pusher who beats his kids. He faked his paralysis to rip off worker's compensation, they say; he was settling grudges. At the very least he's a cop wannabe who jumped at the chance to work undercover with the FBI.

Federal prosecutors praise Kates' courage and say that one of the region's most significant federal hate-crime prosecutions could never have been brought — and won — without Kates' talking about what he saw, taping Demuro and other neighbors with a hidden recording device and, finally, testifying against them at trial.

"Most people would not have made the choice he did," says Nelson S.T. Thayer Jr., one of the prosecutors who handled the case against Dominic Demuro and his two brothers, their father, Felix Demuro Sr., and two neighbors, Joseph Greenwood and Teresa Martin. "It was an extraordinarily isolating choice from all the angles." In October, the FBI gave Kates an award for outstanding citizen service.

Kates knows he did the right thing. He just never realized it would be so costly.

"It's cost me everything," he says. "But . . . I've already made my choices in life. And by thinking any differently, it could crush my world. So I live with what I did."

The 2500 block of South Franklin Street is one of hundreds of almost identical blocks in a city of neighborhoods, one of those blocks where generations are born, grow up and grow old.

It's a blue-collar neighborhood bordered by

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JOSEPH A. SLOBODZIAN is an Inquirer staff writer covering the federal courts.

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Oregon and Moyamensing Avenues and Seventh Street. Many here still refer to Center City as "uptown," as if it were a separate municipality.

And it's about 10 blocks north of Veterans Stadium and an equal distance from the waterfront, in the shadow of the Walt Whitman Bridge. But when you're there, inside the grid of block after block, the rest of the world becomes invisible.

The street is so narrow that houses on the even-numbered side have front porches; the other side has the parking places.

If you were house-shopping here in the spring of 1996, two things probably caught your eye in the 2500 block as you looked north. Newly for rent on the right about two-thirds of the way up the street was 2517, with its bricks scrubbed a lighter red than its neighbors' and its front windows distinguished by pink- and white-striped awnings. On your left was 2534, its porch floor flush with the entrance threshold and a wheelchair lift replacing half the railing.

Mike Kates moved into 2534 on Valentine's Day 1988 from Kensington, where he and his wife, Carol Ann, had met and married. Born in the Northeast, Mike was the youngest of eight children and the only one of Police Officer Walter T. Kates' three boys not to join the force or the military. In 1988 it looked as if he was heading in the opposite direction.

Just married, 19 years old and working as a delivery truck driver, Kates quickly became friends with Dominic Demuro, who lived with his parents and two younger brothers at 2515.

Like Kates, Demuro — a sometime carpenter and drywaller — was fascinated by the martial arts, liked to use marijuana and socialize on the block, and supplemented his legal income outside the law. It was only natural that the best of friends became partners at the entry level of crime.

Sometimes they sold marijuana or other drugs, mostly to get their own free supply. Kates was not above acting as an "enforcer," carrying a gun to protect Demuro and convince a customer to pay up.

Eventually they moved on to stripping valuable copper wiring and pipe from abandoned factories and selling them to recyclers.

Their group, Kates recalls, dubbed itself the South Philly Copper Crew and found a rich cache at the charred, bulldozed remains of the old Publicker Industries distillery on the Delaware riverfront.

"They had these great big transformers, and we would take the copper from inside the transformers," Kates told the jury during the Demuros' trial, detailing his budding criminal career.

Kates and his wife, who'd grown up nearby, seemed to have found their niche on South Franklin. Their daughter, Nichole, was born in 1989; a son, Michael, came along in March 1992.

And then catastrophe.

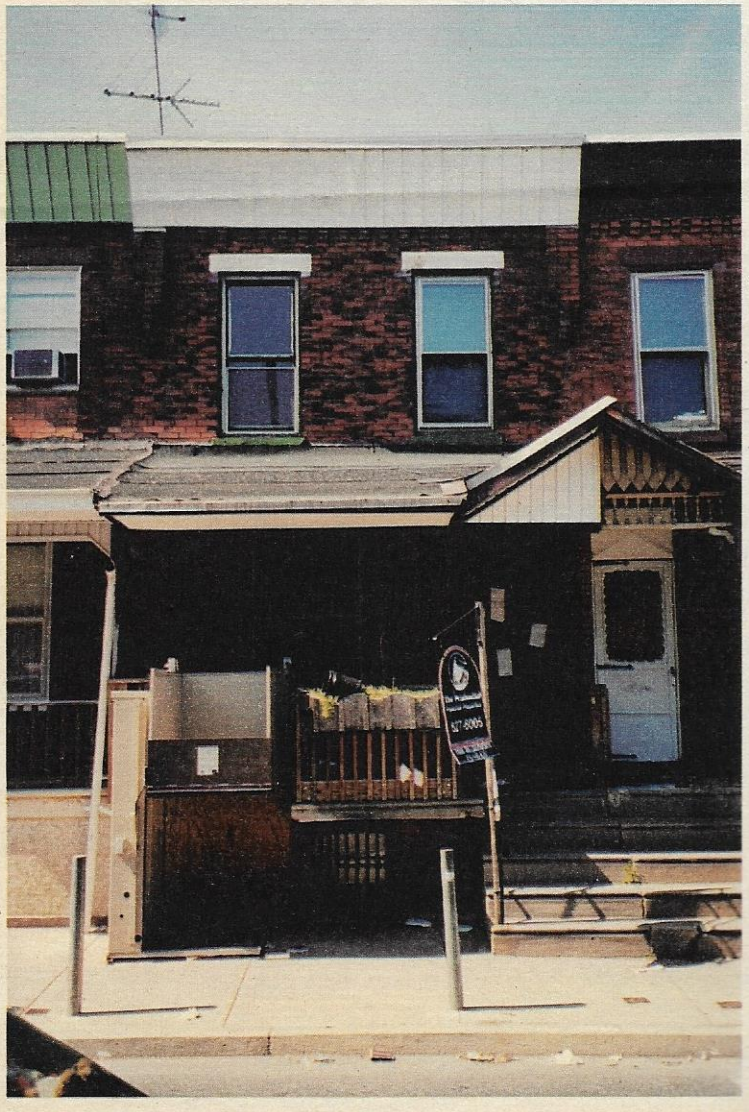
On the day before Thanksgiving, Kates was making a delivery to a nursing home. The automatic lift-gate on his truck was broken, and as he strained to lift it, two workers pushed two 30-gallon drums of liquid, each weighing about 350 pounds, onto the gate.

"It ripped me to the ground," Kates recalled at the trial. The quick movement snapped his lower spine, paralyzing him from the waist down.

Kates was rushed to Nazareth Hospital in Northeast Philadelphia, where he remained until just before Christmas, heavily medicated. It was not until mid-1994, after surgery to control the pain, that Kates was able to begin exercising to recover strength and movement in his upper body.

During that time, Dominic Demuro and his family — father Felix Sr. and younger brothers Michael and Felix Jr. — were there for him.

"They did everything under the sun for me," Kates told the jury. "They dressed me, they carried



A 1996 FBI picture shows Michael Kates' house with its front-porch wheelchair lift.

me up and down stairs. They got me out of bed. They washed me. They fed me."

The Demuros adapted Kates' house for his wheelchair. And most important, they helped him remain a part of the neighborhood, carrying him and the wheelchair to neighbors' homes for get-togethers.

It was the beginning of a new life for Kates. The 2500 block was a "play street," one the city regularly blocked off for the kids. Besides spending more time with his own family, Kates now watched the children of his neighbors.

"Oh, there's a lot that's good," Kates says, closing his eyes and smiling as if suddenly back on the block. "Everybody knows everybody. Everyone says, at least to me, 'Hello! How ya doing?'

"We were a tight block. Everybody had a nickname. I was Smiling Mike. Big Felix. Butter, he's my friend Bill. We'd laugh and joke, we'd block off the street, turn on the fire hydrant, barbecue, parades and everything. And if you ever had a problem, they were there. You were there for them when they needed you. I miss the people over there."

But Kates was also changing, changes that would divide him from Dom Demuro.

"By no means do I consider this a blessing," he says of his accident. "But I would say it was definitely an eye-opener: to be more grateful for family than self-gain or self-advancement, and to being immature and wanting that quick dollar, live life on the edge, fast and all that other good stuff."

The disability had another unforeseen effect: It gave Kates new insight into discrimination.

Early in his life, one of his brothers married a Filipina. The couple had two daughters, and Kates, reared in the white Northeast, often had to shield his nieces from hurtful comments.

Now, in rehabilitation, he was constantly in the company of his nurse, an African American woman named Debra Ayres, and she set him thinking.

"She was there for me, she pushed me when I had no push, when I wanted to quit, not going any further. She was a tremendous influence on my life. I owe her a lot," he says.

"We could discuss everything, from race to gender bias, everything. She was very open and very honest in her answers, and I learned a lot from her — a lot of what she has to deal with in her daily life and how she has the strength to go through and move on and be able to function . . . being called words that I could never use, and still be able to not hold a grudge against the world."

Back at home, Kates discovered he'd joined a minority as well. He and a neighbor had gone to a park when they were confronted by a park caretaker.

"The guy told me that I had to leave because my wheelchair was messing up their grass. And I told him I was allowed to be anywhere where the general public was allowed to be. He said, 'Youse people think you own the world.' "

"I discovered that because of my disability, I was now classed as 'you people.' I can only imagine what it would be like to hear throughout my life."

No resident of Kates' block was African American. He now found himself confronting neighbors — including the Demuros — when they talked about what would happen if someone tried to "bust the block."

Felix Demuro Sr. and his wife had been the focus of media attention in the mid-1970s when they

had taken in 15 foster children, many of them black. Twenty years later, things had apparently changed. Kates says he and the Demuros avoided the subject of race.

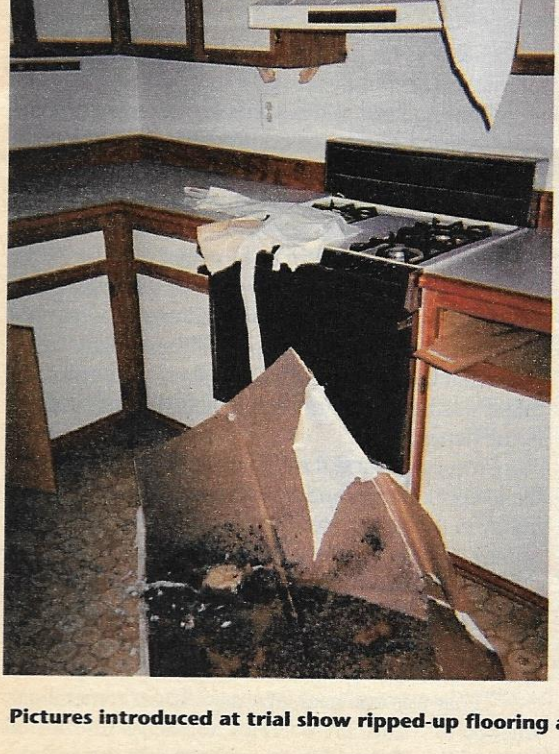
"We had been through hell and back together, and that is just one small segment in the relationship of friends. And they were pretty good about it around me, as far as not going over the line. But they knew my beliefs . . . so they tried to be cautious."

June 7, 1996, was hot and humid. Mike Kates was out on his porch after dinner, smoking marijuana with neighbors. For him, the drug had become therapeutic.

Anti-pain medications "just kicked the daylights out of my appetite . . . bread would even make me sick at that time." Kates' weight dropped alarmingly, from 165 to 119 pounds. Smoking marijuana eased the nausea, helped him keep down his food.

Out in the street neighbors were milling about, joking. So it wasn't unusual when Kates spotted Felix Demuro Jr. — Little Fee, Dom's youngest brother — talking with Ed Majors. The Demuros lived at 2515, and Majors, a self-employed builder, lived at 2519. In between sat 2517, with its candy-striped awnings and new front door.

What Kates saw next was anything but usual. Felix Sr. had just joined them. Little Felix held open



Pictures introduced at trial show ripped-up flooring and

the storm door of 2517 while Majors kicked four times and the inner door of the vacant house burst open. The three neighbors disappeared into the house. For almost half an hour, as Kates watched, stunned, the three went in and out, each time with some object that they'd take into either Majors' or the Demuros' house.

Then Michael Demuro and his pal Joey Greenwood joined them. The group stood in front of 2517, laughing and talking loudly.

"They said there wasn't going to be any niggers moving into this neighborhood, that they were junkies and drug dealers, nothing but trash, and they

weren't breaking this block," Kates testified during the trial.

Majors ran into his house and came out holding a pellet rifle above his head. The group took turns firing at the front of the house.

Other neighbors came out to watch as the group, shouting racial epithets, began slapping high fives — among them, Kates testified, Teresa Martin from across the street.

"I was big-time shocked," Kates says, "thinking, Wow, I can't believe that this is going on.

"The celebration level was appalling: It's something that I still dream about today. That they could be so happy and so proud about what they had done and what they were doing. It was like the Eagles won the Super Bowl or something like that."

About the only relief Kates felt, he says, was that his best friend Dom had nothing to do with it.

When Mike Kates left his porch around 11 that night, he did not call 911, and neither did anyone else. The Demuros, although his friends, were known in the neighborhood to have police contacts — and to be quick to anger, Kates would later testify.

The next morning Samantha Starnes arrived to show her 3-year-old nephew her new house — only to find it trashed. As she watched, the kitchen ceiling collapsed under the weight of water leaking from above.

In the days following, Kates said, the Demuros told neighbors to tell police they were inside sleeping at the time of the incident.

"They said no one can cooperate, that if we don't say anything, that this will all end," Kates testified. "This is South Philadelphia and we stick together."

The police, and later the FBI, began questioning neighbors. Kates, sick at heart, said nothing.

After a local weekly ran a police number in a report on the vandalism, Kates made a call. But he refused to identify himself and nothing came of it.

Then a neighbor mentioned that an FBI agent had left a business card in her door. "I looked at the card," Kates testified, "and I read the name and I memorized the telephone number that was on the card."

The authorities were getting nowhere. Similar incidents had occurred a block or two away. Investigators now saw the same pattern here. No one was talking.

Shortly after noon on June 28, FBI agent John Chesson recalls, his partner's phone began ringing at the FBI's headquarters at Sixth and Arch Streets.

"She said, 'There's a guy on the phone that says he saw everything,' " says Chesson, recalling then-novice agent Christine Kibby's excited words. "You don't get a chance like that in a lot of these cases. I said we've got to meet this guy now, before he has the chance to think about it and change his mind."

The caller said he used a wheelchair. Chesson suggested a McDonald's about 10 blocks from South Franklin Street. He figured the two agents would drive up, whisk him into their big FBI sedan and drive to a more secluded spot to talk.

But this was life, not the movies.

"We were wearing suits and had this big bureau car and I remember it was this hot summer day, real hot, like in the 90s," Chesson says. "We're driving up and we spot this guy in a wheelchair. He's got no shirt and tattoos all over his body and long hair and I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, what have we come across here?' "

Kates' electric wheelchair was too heavy and bulky to fit in the car. And he didn't want to go inside the McDonald's, where he often saw the Demuros and other neighbors.

So there were the agents, speaking with their highly visible prospective star witness in a steamy public parking lot just blocks from his home.

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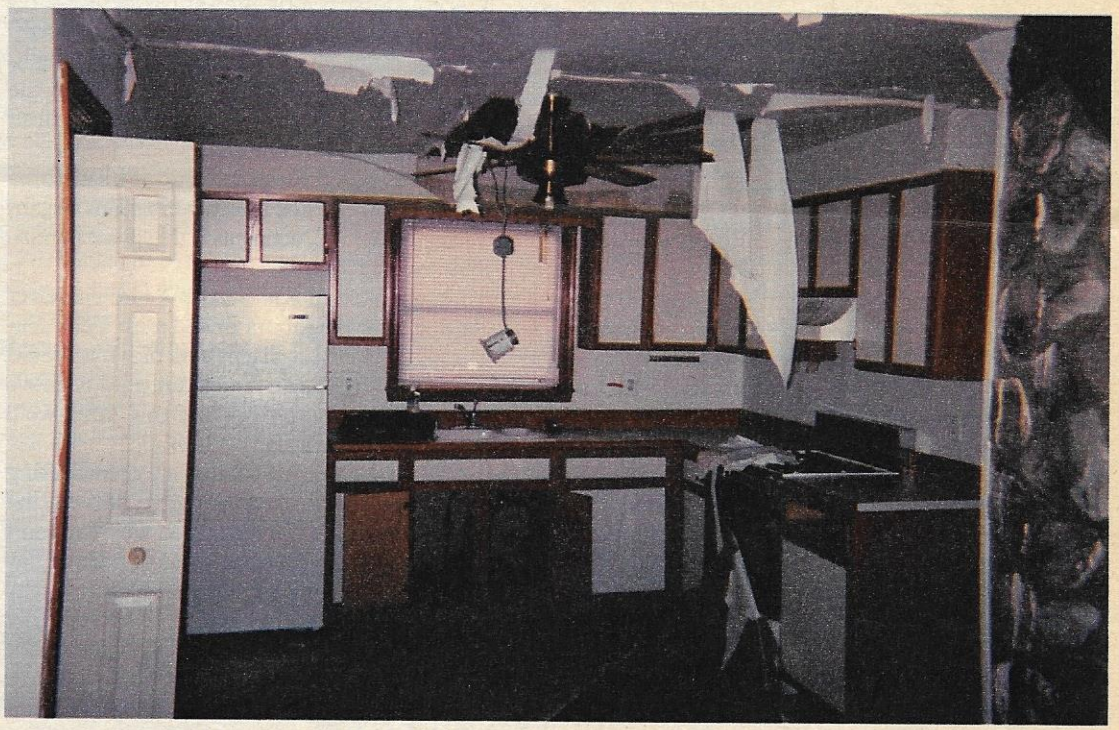

and extensive water damage at 2517 S. Franklin.

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"It was lonely," Kates recalls, laughing at the absurdity. "They did their best to make it a normal scenario, but you *know* in the back of your mind who you're talking to. It looks like, instead of 'McDonald's,' it says: 'FBI talking to this guy right here.' "

Kates proceeded to pour out a flood of details about "some people on the block, the 'clan,' " and what they did on the night of June 7.

"It was really confusing to kind of grasp all the information and try to figure out exactly what he was telling us," Chesson says. "I was convinced right up front that this guy was doing this because he thought it was the right thing to do."

Chesson and Kibby set up a meeting at their office. Kates could travel fairly long distances in his electric wheelchair, and his neighbors knew he regularly went to Center City for physical therapy. It became their cover.

Kates seemed a perfect witness — his recitation of what he'd seen was consistent, unexaggerated and sincere — and the federal prosecutors working with Chesson and Kibby were impressed. And surprised.

"I thought it would have to have been someone who was involved. The natural inclination is that no one does this just because they're a good guy," says Assistant U.S. Attorney Faithe Moore Taylor. It became clear, Taylor says, that Kates "was extremely committed to just doing the right thing. And that was what compelled him: that this simply was wrong."

Even so, Taylor was sure they would need independent corroborating evidence. Kates' admitted use of marijuana and other drugs and past criminal conduct would damage his credibility, as would speculation about his motive.

And though prosecutors and the FBI believed the vandalism was racially motivated, there was no evidence of it: no racial epithets or other slogans written on the walls. Word on the street was that it was probably kids, or an "insurance job."

Kates would have to wear a wire and let the suspects incriminate themselves on tape. But a man in a wheelchair with a wife and two young children in the close world of South Franklin Street was an extremely vulnerable undercover operative.

"We were most concerned with his safety and the safety of his family. If the chair could not be 'teched' and he could not be protected, we would not have done it," Taylor says.

Kates was willing.

On July 11, FBI technicians secreted a reel-to-reel tape recorder with three hours of tape in Kates' electric wheelchair. Microphone wires ran up through the back of the chair.

Just in case Kates was conning the cops, Chesson turned on the tape recorder and wrapped it with duct tape. Any attempt to control the recording would disturb the wrapping. Allowing an hour for Kates to travel to Franklin Street and back, Kates would have two hours to meet and record his subjects.

A live transmitter enabled the FBI to follow him from a short distance and hear everything that transpired. They agreed on a code word in case things

Dominic Demuro leans toward defense lawyer L. Felipe Restrepo before U.S. District Judge J. Curtis Joyner.

went bad.

"It seemed like it took forever," Kates says, recalling that July 11 trip to South Franklin Street. "And in your mind you're worried that he's going to find out. . . . That was what played to my brain the whole time. Because if you get caught you're a dead man. That's just the bottom line."

The agents tailed Kates to South Philadelphia shortly after 5 p.m. Once the conversations began, they walked into 2517, acting as if they were continuing their investigation.

Inside, they tuned Kates in on a radio receiver as he and several neighbors talked with Felix Demuro Sr. They heard a discussion of what would happen if another African American tried to move on the block. "We won't flood it this time, we'll burn it," Felix Demuro said.

At one point Demuro spotted an agent leaving 2517. "That looks like that FBI agent, don't it, the blonde?" he was taped saying. "See why we don't want niggers up the street, see what they do? They [FBI] go around, that's a good example now why we don't want them up the street."

"Yeah, but what we gonna do, though?" Kates asked.

"Burn the f—ing house this time," Demuro replied.

Demuro talked about his dislike of black people and showed Kates how he had used auto body filler to plug up the locks of 2517 to dissuade anyone from moving in.

And he boasted that authorities would never prove the motive for the vandalism. "There's nothing in there that would say it was racial, was it?"

Authorities were not only impressed, but also concerned that Demuro might actually burn down a house, and with it the entire block. The FBI asked the police to start patrolling the street.

The response was immediate.

The next day Dom and Felix Jr. came over to Kates' house, cornered him, ripped open his shirt and frisked him for microphones or a tape recorder. Dom was carrying a pistol and made a threatening gesture.

The incident heightened concerns about Kates' safety. And his family's.

Kates had not told his wife about contacting the FBI, wearing a wire, or confronting the Demuros. "We didn't want anyone else to know," prosecutor Taylor says. "Everyone who knew increased the risk to him. Only he knew."

Kates had other reasons as well.

"She does not share my views to the degree that I do. . . . I don't force my views and opinions on people, but I was worried that possibly she might agree with what they had done," Kates says. "I just thought that it was better that the less people that knew about it, the better it was."

Prosecutors and the FBI decided it was impossible to continue the undercover operation with Kates' family in the house. But how to get them out without tipping off the Demuros and others on the block?

Kates and authorities still will not give details, except to say that FBI agents accosted the family at an undisclosed location and took Carol Ann and the two children into protective custody on the spot.

"That was one heck of a day," Kates remembers, shaking his head. He declines to discuss his marital status. His wife was angry and hurt that she and the kids had suddenly been uprooted from family, friends and their world. "It was better for them not to be there. And I [felt] that I could regain their confidence. . . . I could accept that something could happen to me in a minute. But I couldn't live with them retaliating against my family."

Kates remained on South Franklin, making seven recordings between July 11 and Aug. 6, 1996. But none would be as shattering as the third, on the evening of July 19, when he met with Dom Demuro.

As the tape rolls, Demuro is saying that the van-

dalism at 2517 could just as easily have been an insurance fraud case made to appear racially motivated.

"It's a rented house. How you know the owner didn't want to make a few extra bucks before, you know, the renter came in? Make it look good because she was black, and made it, make it look like a racial thing.

"He got some money for what happened in that house with the ceilings and all fell down," Demuro adds. "Bathrooms, everything fell down."

"How did all that get — who busted what?" Kates asks.

"I did it. I'm the one who went in the house, broke the water heater, water heater piece. I just turned it around, I broke the toilet, broke the sink, let it run, filled the tub up and let it run."

"Cool," Kates says on the recording. Inside, he felt sick at what he knew was being captured on tape. Demuro, Kates suddenly realized, had arrived on the scene after he had gone inside that night.

"When it was happening, I didn't think he was going to tell me about anything *he* had done, I thought he was going to tell me about what *they* had done. And he just about blew me out of my socks, that he really did it. There was nothing I could do to stop anything."

Chesson could see the emotion on Kates' face when he arrived back at the FBI office. "Dominic was his best friend and he had told us that Dom was not involved in any of this," Chesson says. "Probably if he had known Dominic was involved, he might not have come forward like he did. . . . He realized that he had come to the point of no return."

Taylor, who would interrogate Kates at trial, remembers that Kates "was devastated. But he had already gone too far by then. He had decided to do the right thing — the cost was just higher now."

On subsequent tapes, Dom Demuro would dig himself in deeper and implicate others, including Terri Martin, who had testified under oath that she had not seen anything on the night of June 7.

After the Aug. 6 tape, the FBI decided to end Kates' undercover role. There had been another incident: Someone had entered Kates' bedroom, tied up his German shepherd and stabbed his mattress with a short martial arts saber.

No one was ever charged, but Chesson says Kates took it as a message from the Demuros. Only Dom could have come into the house and

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The verdict

Eight South Philadelphia residents were indicted July 3, 1997, in the June 7, 1996, racially motivated vandalism at 2517 S. Franklin St.

- **Felix Demuro Sr.**, 58, convicted of civil rights conspiracy and housing intimidation charges, sentenced Aug. 6, 1998, to 70 months in prison, fined $1,000, ordered to pay $6,176 restitution.
- **Dominic Demuro**, 31, convicted of civil rights conspiracy, housing intimidation, witness tampering and firearms violation; sentenced June 30, 1998, to 131 months in prison, $1,000 fine and restitution of $6,176.
- **Felix Demuro Jr.**, 23, convicted of civil rights conspiracy and housing intimidation, sentenced July 1, 1998, to 60 months in prison, fined $1,000, restitution of $6,176.
- **Michael Demuro**, 29, convicted of civil rights conspiracy and housing intimidation, sentenced July 1, 1998, to 66 months in prison, $1,000 fine, restitution of $6,176.
- **Joseph Greenwood**, 24, convicted of civil rights conspiracy and housing intimidation, sentenced June 29, 1998, to 57 months in prison, $1,000 fine and $6,176 restitution.
- **Edward Majors**, 43, pleaded guilty to civil rights conspiracy and housing intimidation charges, sentenced Aug. 19, 1998, to one year in prison, restitution of $6,176. Now in witness protection program.
- **Teresa A. Martin,** 31, convicted of civil rights conspiracy and perjury, sentenced July 8, 1998, to 57 months in prison, $500 fine.
- **Arthur Martin**, 39, all charges dismissed by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

The Demuros, Greenwood and Teresa Martin appealed their convictions and sentences. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit denied the appeals of their convictions, but ordered resentencing on the conspiracy count for Dominic and Michael Demuro and Joseph Greenwood. The resentencing, set for Feb. 9 and 10, is expected to reduce their sentences by about a year.

— Joseph A. Slobodzian

CONVICTIONS

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tied up the dog without getting attacked and bitten.

"Mike was starting to show signs of stress. He wasn't sleeping, and he was calling us at all hours. We weren't sleeping. Mistakes are made if people work under too much stress."

Partly to cover Kates' activities and partly to encourage cooperation from other neighbors, the FBI had served grand jury subpoenas on every resident of the block. That now became the cover to get Kates out.

Kates told the Demuros he was running, moving out, so that he could avoid testifying against Dom and his family when he went before the grand jury. Kates' father pulled up in a truck, packed everything he could, and Mike Kates said goodbye to the 2500 block forever.

Eleven months after the last tape, the U.S. Attorney's Office unsealed a grand jury indictment against Felix Demuro Sr., his three sons, Joseph Greenwood, Teresa and Arthur Martin, and Ed Majors, charging them with a criminal civil rights conspiracy to intimidate Samantha Starnes from moving into the neighborhood.

Felix Sr. — Big Fee — was set free on bail. But his sons, based on their criminal records and the audio tapes, were held without bail.

Ed Majors caved and pleaded guilty, just as Dom Demuro, on one of the tapes, had predicted he would. The charges against Artie Martin were dismissed.

The six remaining defendants were ready to plead guilty on the eve of trial — until Felix Demuro Sr. read the text of the plea that said he had committed the crime for racial reasons.

"They say I'm a racist, there's no way I'll sign that. I'd rather do the time," Felix Demuro Sr. told his sons after hours of last-minute plea talks with prosecutors collapsed.

"The government calls Michael Kates," said prosecutor Faithe Taylor, as John Chesson wheeled Kates into the somber wood-paneled courtroom.

Normally, Kates would have had the symbolic protection of the wall surrounding three sides of the witness box. But the wheelchair wouldn't fit. He was wheeled into the well of the courtroom, about 30 feet from the man he'd once said he'd "take a bullet for."

Kates couldn't resist glancing at his friend, and they made eye contact often during his two days of testimony. Dom Demuro always looked back, and the message on his face was clear: *betrayal.*

"I thought for sure that there was enough evidence that he wouldn't have wanted to go that way [to trial] and that he was going to do the right thing ultimately," Kates says quietly, his voice tinged with sadness.

But Dom Demuro did not plead guilty and, like his family, did not testify in his own defense. He has steadfastly refused, through his lawyer, to speak about the case or about Kates. He was sentenced to prison though insisting he vandalized the house at 2517 S. Franklin to damage Ed Majors' house — the flood water drained into Majors' renovated basement — so Majors could collect insurance money.

On the 2500 block of South Franklin Street, life goes on. Some neighbors are more reticent these days. The publicity around a major criminal case will do that.

But in the holiday season, Christmas lights brightened many porches. The wheelchair lift was gone from Mike Kates' old house, a patch covering the gap in the railing. Felix Demuro's house seemed unchanged, as did the house with pink-striped awnings next door.

Ed and Liz Majors' house is vacant. After Majors pleaded guilty, he and his wife became neighborhood pariahs. Their house was pelted with eggs, the windows smashed.

Majors finished a one-year prison term last summer. He and his wife and 10-year-old son are also in the witness protection program.

"My sense is that they're really trying to make a go of it," Thayer says.

Mike Kates could tell them about coping. He has a new job but can't talk about it. He can't make phone calls without wondering if the person at the other end has caller ID; no spontaneous calls to his folks or anyone else in his old life who might divulge, even inadvertently, his new identity.

It makes maintaining a relationship with his family all the more difficult. Kates hesitates to talk about his parents out of fear that someone might go after them to retaliate against him.

"Understand, there are people who don't agree with what I did. It put other people in risk," Kates says. "It took them a while to accept what I have done, but I think I've brought them around."

For Kates' children, it has meant a new surname and a host of new rules not always easy to understand. A daughter proud of knowing how to spell her name has had to give that up. Both kids have had to skip school pictures and other rites of passage, "just so that no one from anywhere where I do live could ever geographically tie us to any one location."

"They remember where they came from," Kates says. "I've explained to them as well as a father can explain to his children. I have great children. They pretty much accept at this point in their life where they are.

"I explained to them what prejudice is, and that I didn't agree with it. I explained it to them so that they would understand what and why I did. And they know who did what."

Samantha Starnes, daughter of an African American father and a mother of Italian descent, at first did not believe the vandalism was a hate crime. Later, she said she had "never experienced anything like this."

Starnes says she was relieved by the guilty

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verdicts. "I was really kind of scared when I heard how they carried themselves," she says.

She never moved into 2517 S. Franklin.

There's a moral in South Franklin Street for everyone, and evidence to support or undercut any stereotype. That racism exists in a working-class South Philadelphia neighborhood should surprise no one, just as it should surprise no one that it exists in affluent neighborhoods.

But what is one to make of a Felix Demuro, who cared for African American foster children, yet vandalized a neighbor's house to prevent it from being rented to a black woman he'd never met?

Or Terri Martin, the mother of five children, who denied being present the night of the vandalism? One of her character witnesses was an African American friend from her childhood, godmother to one of her children, who told the jury that Martin was her "sister" and who greeted Martin's mother as "Mom."

"It just shows you how complex we can be," says prosecutor Taylor, an African American who in her Philadelphia childhood found racial slurs to be "a way of life."

She calls it "an important case for us to bring, win or lose. Win or lose, we knew we wouldn't lose because it was the right thing to do."

Thayer agrees: It's too easy for people to look at South Franklin and file it in a stereotypical pigeonhole.

What distinguished the Demuros and their neighbors, Thayer says, was that they chose to act on their prejudices. Felix Demuro Sr. — and by extension, the rest of the clan — "wanted to be the judge and jury of who was fit to move onto that block." □