

LOCAL NEWS ... BY STEVE E. SWENSON, Californian staff writer

After the force: Retired police detectives start own private investigative service

Lifelong bonds often begin in school. The same can be said of those formed at the Bakersfield Police Academy. Steve Ramsey and Jim Bennett met in the academy in 1978. They spent 29 years on the force, doing many of the same tasks, until they both retired in the last few months at age 50.



Retired Bakersfield police detectives Jim Bennett, left, and Steve Ramsey, right, went through the academy and police force together, and have started Ramsey-Bennett Investigative Services. Photo: Dan Campo - The Bakersfield Californian



The 1978 Bakersfield Police Academy class includes (front row from left) Steve Ramsey and Jim Bennett, who are starting a new detective agency. Helping them will be Brad Roark (second row left of Ramsey) and Dennis McBride (top row above Bennett).

Ramsey retired as a homicide detective and Bennett retired as a general investigations detective. They helped catch quite a few high-profile crooks in their careers that also included traffic accident and narcotics investigations, as well as street patrol.

Ramsey and Bennett, like other officers before them, took advantage of a system that allows peace officers at age 50 to receive 3 percent of their current pay for each year of service in a retirement package.

Now they are starting their own investigations agency. They're getting some help from two other members of their academy class, retired homicide detective Dennis McBride and retired Sgt. Brad Roark.

The group bonded with one another over the years. One example was in 1981 when Bennett and Ramsey, as motorcycle traffic officers, were first to arrive at an armed robbery at Community First Bank at Chester Avenue and First Street. Ramsey peeked into the front door and yelled, "It's going down. It's going down," to Bennett, who was heading toward the back. Both fired shots from about 100 yards away, but missed the fleeing, rifle-carrying robbers. As a bonding moment, "that was up there," Ramsey said. The robbers were later caught.

Ramsey and Bennett grew up in Bakersfield, Ramsey graduating from Highland High in 1975 and Bennett from South High in 1974.

Bennett came from a law enforcement family -- his father, Capt. Edwin Bennett was in the Sheriff's Department as was his brother, Sgt. John Bennett, and his father-in-law was Assistant Sheriff Bob Fisher. Still, Bennett started out as a firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service and helped battle a legendary blaze at Big Sur. "It was not only real work, but dangerous," he said. So he decided to become a cop.

Ramsey tested the waters in the city's first police trainee program in which youths ride with officers to see if they might like the job. "I realized this was me," he said.

After both men graduated from the academy, their careers began to follow the same paths -- patrol, motorcycles, narcotics and becoming detectives.

Their personal lives also meshed. They got married about the same time, each had two children of about the same ages, and they enjoyed socializing with each other's families and taking trips to go snow skiing, see Palm Springs and play golf.

Ramsey is clearly the better golfer, a single-digit handicap at Seven Oaks. But Bennett said, "The reason he golfs with me is I make him look good."

Bennett said when his son became very ill at age 12, Ramsey was right there as the Bennett family went through some scary times at Stanford Medical Center. Bennett's son pulled through and is now a Cal Poly graduate.

As both men were about to retire, they talked about how they could use their skills in private business. "We decided we were still young and we would give it a try," Bennett said. Ramsey said, "We are experienced investigators and know what it's like working with the public." Besides, he added, "I can't stand sitting around for five minutes."

They have spent recent months setting up their own business, Ramsey-Bennett Investigative Services.

Why did Ramsey get his name first? Badge numbers. His is 399, Bennett's is 401, Roark's is 402 and McBride's is 405. "That's how many things are decided in police work," explained retired Bakersfield Police Sgt. Tony Ennis, who will also serve as a consultant in the business.

The group of five has about 150 years combined service as police officers, Ramsey said. William Means, a private investigator for 25 years, helped with the start-up and will continue to consult for the venture.

The business will open in mid-April and will perform a variety of investigations -- background, workers' compensation, missing persons, family issues, traffic accidents, surveillance, business issues and service of legal documents -- but no criminal defense. They have an office in central Bakersfield and a phone number, 326-RBIS (7247).

The continued association with officers they have worked with for nearly three decades is just natural, Ramsey said. "We all became friends."

Some high-profile cases Jim Bennett and Steve Ramsey helped solve:

- **The 1991 arrest of John Berry Ingram, a man District Attorney Ed Jagels once described as "a big fish" in providing narcotics in Kern County. After agreeing to buy \$20,000 worth of methamphetamine from the undercover officers, Ingram was surrounded by scores of officers as he drove on Brundage Lane smoking a marijuana cigarette. Ingram told the officers, "My, you sure get excited about a guy smoking a joint." Ingram was sentenced in federal court to a life prison term, though he will be eligible for parole in about four years, the detectives said.**

- **Bennett's work as a narcotics detective led to the arrest in 1991 of a former dentist, Richard Horace Strawder, 56, at a Rosedale quaalude factory where officers seized chemicals capable of producing \$260 million in street value of the drug, police reported.**

Ramsey's homicide cases:

- **The 1994 rape and strangulation death of 40-year-old Mary Rose Breck on Oak View Court in The Oaks. Bob Russell Williams Jr., then 18, who once said, "I just wanted to hurt her," has been sentenced to death.**

- **The 2000 kidnapping for ransom and strangulation death of 31-year-old Bradley St. Clair, who operated a development and management company. Keith Bryan Shell and Susan Clevenger are serving life without parole in the death.**

- **The 1998 brutal stabbing death of 63-year-old Sidney Sheffield, a longtime community advocate for health care and education. In a case with scarce and conflicting evidence, Larry Weston Andrews, 47, recently was sentenced to nine years in prison for a voluntary manslaughter plea bargain**