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Whistle-Blowing Deputy Marshal Tells of Long Harassment

By SELWYN RAAB

NEW YORK -- As a police officer and investigator, Stephen M. Zanowic Jr. spent 10 years on the streets, mainly chasing muggers and corrupt officers. In 1988, he thought he had found a prestigious law-enforcement niche when he was appointed a U.S. deputy marshal in Manhattan.

But Zanowic says that his promising career is now in a shambles because he, a white man, complained to federal officials that white deputies were discriminating against black employees in the Marshals Service's Manhattan office.

Zanowic claims that supervisors and other deputy marshals labeled him "a white rat" after he disclosed that about a dozen of them used a picture of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for target practice and openly voiced racial slurs and threats against a black deputy marshal. In a federal lawsuit and in an interview, Zanowic (pronounced ZAN-oh-wick) asserted that officials in the Manhattan office responded to his whistleblowing by blocking him from promotions and by assigning him to the least desirable marshal's job: guarding prisoners in a courthouse cellblock.

He said the hostility against him -- even in an office that was monitored for security 24 hours a day by video cameras and guards -- led to incidents in which his case files and his marshal's badge were stolen from his locker, a photograph of his wife that was on his desk was defaced, pornographic pictures of blacks were left on his desk, the word rat was scratched on his locker in six-inch-high letters, and a supervisor gave him a toy rat for Christmas.

Stress that he brought home from his job, Zanowic said, contributed to the breakup of his marriage. His wife of nine years obtained a divorce last year after he was denied a transfer to Florida.

"I found out the hard way what happens when you speak out against inherent racism in the Marshals Service," Zanowic said. "They don't investigate the charges. Instead, they ostracize you as a weird malcontent and you become the target of harassment and internal investigations." William T. Licatovich, a spokesman for the service, said that previous racism grievances filed by Zanowic were determined by the Justice Department to be unfounded. He said federal rules prohibited him from commenting further on Zanowic's charges until the suit was resolved. Zanowic, who filed the federal lawsuit in July, is seeking back pay for promotions he contends were unfairly denied him and an unspecified amount for alleged reprisals and abuses.

A spokeswoman for the Black Congressional Caucus, Marcella Howell, said that the caucus would review Zanowic's allegations Nov. 5 at a hearing in Washington concerning charges of racial discrimination in the Marshals Service and in other Federal law-enforcement agencies. Founded in 1789, the Marshals Service is the oldest federal law-enforcement agency. Its 2,702 deputies and supervisors are responsible for protecting 700 courthouses, apprehending federal fugitives, operating the Federal Witness Protection program, seizing property forfeited to the government, investigating terrorists and guarding and transporting federal defendants and prisoners.

The Manhattan office is the headquarters for the Southern District of New York state, which covers Manhattan, the Bronx and the northern suburbs and is considered by law-enforcement officials to be a prized assignment.

The service said its current records show that as of August, the Southern District had 93 deputy marshals and supervisors: 83 whites, 4 blacks, 5 of Hispanic origin and 1 Asian American. Nationally, 2,267, or 83.9 percent, of all deputies and supervisors are white; 195, or 7.2 percent, are black; 177, or 6.5 percent, are Hispanic; 45, or 1.7 percent, are Asian, and 18, or 0.7 percent, are native Americans.

Zanowic, 42, a sinewy, 6-foot-1-inch martial-arts enthusiast, grew up in Jersey City, served two years in the Army, mainly with the Military Police, and joined the Bayonne, N.J., Police Department in 1978.

In 1983, he switched to the New York City police force, where he was a patrol officer for two years and an investigator for three years in the Internal Affairs Bureau, which investigates misconduct by officers.

After passing a civil service test for the Marshals Service and completing a 13-week training course, Zanowic was assigned in the fall of 1988 to the Manhattan headquarters. "It was a good old boy's network," he said. "Most of the white guys deliberately separated themselves from the handful of African-American deputies and behind their backs always spoke derogatorily about them."

Many white deputies, he continued, frequently used ugly racial epithets and cautioned him against working with black deputies, especially William Scott, who in 1970 was the first black to be appointed a deputy marshal in the Southern District.

Zanowic said his background as a policeman drew him to Scott. "I could see from his confidence and demeanor that he was someone you could trust in a life-or-death situation," Zanowic said . But befriending Scott and seeking permission to work with him on fugitive warrant cases soon drew the ire of about a dozen white deputies, Zanowic said. Once, he recalled, two deputies, who were unaware that he was observing them, pulled out their handguns when Scott walked by and pretended to shoot him in the back.

Scott, 57, who resigned in 1995 after 25 years as a deputy marshal and the higher rank of inspector, said that Zanowic should be a role model for the Marshals Service. "There are very few people with the courage to stand up the way he did and risk his career and his life for principles," said Scott, who has also filed a civil rights lawsuit against the service. Going through the chain of command, Zanowic said that in 1989 and 1990 he reported to several officials in the New York office the racist comments made about Scott and other black deputies. But no action was taken, he said.

By late 1989, Zanowic said, he was the target of a campaign by other deputies to intimidate him from making further complaints of racial Many deputies, he said, refused to talk to or work with him.

Because of the job stress, Zanowic said he took an unpaid leave of absence in March from his \$67,000-a-year job, and in July filed a civil rights discrimination suit in U.S. District Court in Manhattan against the Marshals Service.

"I want justice and my career to get back on track," Zanowic said. "Most of all I want an apology and an admission that they close their eyes to the mistreatment of minorities."

