

Police Officer Vu X. Nguyen

Cleveland Division of Police



To understand what kind of man Police Officer Vu Nguyen was, consider this story, which doesn't even center on him:

The Cleveland Police Athletic League throws an annual Christmas party to treat thousands of children to games, gifts and lunch. Nguyen had volunteered every year, so, for the organizers, the gathering on Dec. 1 — the first without him — took on a somber note.

But it didn't go off without a Nguyen.

The officer's 15-year-old daughter, Kayla, a high-school sophomore, got up early on that Saturday and spent eight hours straight helping children pick out gifts in the toy tent.

"Not one complaint," said Cleveland Police Sgt. Jennifer Ciaccia, who went through the police academy with Officer Nguyen and lives next door to the family. "Kayla's a lot like her dad in that respect. She likes to be able to make somebody smile."

Nguyen's mission in life was to make others smile, especially his wife, Holli, and their two daughters — Maya is seven years younger than Kayla. The girls soaked up his selflessness and his positive outlook.

"Literally all he wanted was for his family to be happy," Ciaccia said. "But he also somehow managed to touch so many people's lives and make a difference by being himself and being present and engaged."

The Avon resident spent 20 years working the streets for the Cleveland Police Department. He was a popular officer, with commendations in his file including a Medal of Heroism and a special thanks from the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force.

Nguyen took police tactics seriously, just as he did the people he protected.

Detective Aaron Reese, Nguyen's partner for more than six years, said he was the kind of officer who, if he was called to a single mom's home and found the refrigerator low on food, would go buy the family groceries using his own money.

In fact, the Nguyen family dog was a rescue Nguyen had



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found — sick and abandoned in an empty house — while on patrol.

With animals and people alike, Nguyen shared his big heart.

"It's funny, because he made me take the sergeant's exam," Reese recalled. "I really had no desire to take the test, but he made me sign up for the prep course. ... I took it, and here I am very close to getting promoted — and it's all because of him. He was always looking out for me."

Nguyen was known around his neighborhood for passing out popsicles and organizing games involving 20 or so children at the local pool.

"He was like a dad to everybody's kids," Ciaccia said.

The officer also loved to eat and loved to take his family on vacations.

Nguyen was one of 14 brothers and sisters who have spread throughout the country, providing excellent vacation opportunities. The family emigrated from Vietnam to the Cleveland suburb of Lakewood in 1975, when Vu was 5 years old. His family called him the fun sibling, and the strong one.

Which is why, in part, his death at age 50 came as such a shock.

On July 2, 2018, Nguyen collapsed in 90-degree heat during a canine-officer training exercise. In large part due to the exertion, he ended up suffering organ failure; he was put on life support and died four days later, on July 6, at Cleveland Clinic.

Nguyen is survived by Holli, to whom he was married for almost 18 years; Kayla and Maya; siblings Tam (Ken), Phuong (Trung), Van (Linh), Hang (Larry), Hai (Terri), Son (Nancy), Nga (Thuy), Phong (My-Lan), Huyen, Lan (Le), Mai (John), Truc (Sulaiman) and Thao (Kekoa); and more than 30 nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by a young son, Devin Vu Nguyen, and his mother and father, a former police chief in Saigon.

"I would hope people just remember Vu as the guy who would give anything for anybody," Ciaccia said. "He was completely selfless."