

From narcotics to human-trafficking: Former Phoenix detective still investigating in new venture

By Megan Lupo

PHOENIX — It was August 1999 when 12th-grader Rich Brodie trod cautiously through the doors of Mountain Pointe High School in Ahwatukee.

Scanning the hallways, he appeared anxious. On top of being a transfer student from New York, Brodie was held back a grade and almost 20 years old. He was desperate to fit in with the southwest adolescent crowd but, soon enough, became acclimated by indulging in the social scene.

Although he never felt comfortable at an intimate house party, Brodie made an effort to drive out to Tucson or Scottsdale and go to raves on Saturday nights with his newfound friends.

As the months went by, the outings Brodie made appearances at escalated into more troublesome behavior— buying cocaine and Ecstasy in the school parking lot and during lunch.

Toward the end of November, Brodie was on the verge of expulsion for missing classes when one student turned to him and said that he looked a lot older than he said he was.

That's because Brodie was.

Brodie was actually the alias then-29-year-old Rich Lebel, former detective in the Phoenix police department's drug enforcement bureau, said he used when he and two other officers got their fictitious school papers notarized and went undercover at two Phoenix high schools to investigate possible drug activity due to parental complaints.

"The teachers didn't know. The administration didn't know. The principal didn't know. The only person that knew was the superintendent of [the Tempe Union High School District]," Lebel said.

The outcome of the three-month operation led to drug-dealing charges for 12 students and five adults, according to Lebel.

Lebel said he worked in law enforcement for 22 years — 18 years of those spent primarily working with the Phoenix police department's conspiracy squad, investigating money laundering activity, drug-trafficking organizations and, occasionally, murderers.

In 2005 and 2006, like poachers hunting prey, a killing duo known as the “Serial Shooters” terrorized Phoenix residents, as they drove around the city and shot at unsuspecting pedestrians, Lebel said, recalling an impactful investigation he was a part of.

After Phoenix detectives in another unit were able to identify the killers as Dale Hausner and Samuel Dieteman due to an informant’s tip in summer 2006 and get their address and phone numbers, the investigators asked Lebel for assistance in conducting an emergency wiretap.

While the detectives, including Lebel, bugged the apartment walls of the shooters’ adjacent neighbor at their complex in Mesa, Lebel was simultaneously listening to the phone calls and writing the affidavit needed within 48 hours to obtain a court order for the wiretapping, Lebel said.

Throughout the next six hours that Lebel and the squad gathered evidence, they heard the shooters pull out a scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings of their crimes and reminisce, and watched, at one point, Dieteman walk across the street to a pharmacy, take a bottle of hair dye off the shelf, walk into the store’s bathroom and dye his hair.

Lebel called him “a complete wing nut.”

“But what was really disgusting was Hausner had a daughter. She had a really bad sickness, [and she’s in the apartment with them.] Hausner wanted to put his daughter to bed, and he said, ‘Tell Sammy night, night.’ And she said, ‘Night, night Sammy.’ And he said, ‘Tell Sammy not to kill anybody tonight.’ And she goes, ‘Don’t go killing anybody tonight,’” Lebel said. “It totally made the hair on the back of your neck stand up. These guys are truly sick, psychotic killers.”

Dieteman ended up being sentenced to life imprisonment without parole, while Hausner was sentenced to death but committed suicide in prison, according to Lebel.

Retired from the Phoenix police department since 2017, Lebel currently is the executive director of the transaction record analysis center (TRAC), a centralized database that provides experts access to worldwide money transfers to detect money laundering activity, according to the Arizona Financial Crimes Task Force overview.

Lebel and his team of analysts at TRAC said they use their knowledge of financial crime to lead detectives to human-traffickers, as they believe most crimes are money-driven.

In terms of Lebel's drive and perceptive ability to find criminals by following the money, TRAC special investigations analyst Omar Lucero, who was a former linguist that assisted Lebel when he worked in narcotics, said that Lebel has a "nose for it."

"There's a big learning thirst for money laundering activity. I feel like he quickly adapted and became well-versed in money laundering within the first two years," Lucero said. "I believe he is considered one of the top money transmitter investigators in the country."

Echoing his admiration for Lebel, TRAC intelligence analyst and former Arizona Attorney General Auditor II Jawan Little said that Lebel was a "go-getter and a self-starting, motivated individual in day-to-day work."

Educating law enforcement globally on finding traffickers through tracking money activity, Lebel said he traveled to Nigeria last year and spoke at a panel.

"Nigeria has one of the biggest sex trafficking problems in the world," Lebel said. "I did a presentation for them and said 'If you guys could become more effective at learning how to do money laundering investigations and follow the money, it's just another way that will help you guys dismantle these groups.'"

For the two decades that Lebel was with the Phoenix police department, he reflected that human trafficking always existed, but there's an awareness now.

The high profile cases and international conferences are a long way from his first two years in law enforcement, as a police officer in his home state of Connecticut — a job he called “boring.”

Although, in his TRAC office inklings of hometown pride poke through with a Boston Red Sox sticker on his minifridge and University of Connecticut memorabilia sitting on his desk shelf.

His undercover investigations, also, had a touch of home with “Brodie” being his mother's maiden name.

Lebel said he was inspired to be in law enforcement during his real high school experience, and he still has that same boyhood spark with his role at TRAC.

“What makes me passionate now about this is there's still so much to learn. I'm doing something different than I did back then,” Lebel said. “With technology evolving and just the way money [moving] around the world changing, whether it be cryptocurrency, there's so much to learn. I don't feel like I'm sitting here in a field where I know everything. That's kind of what keeps it exciting.”