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## Mother grieves for the officer who reached out to her son

By **Patty Fisher**  
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Not every mother would have a special fondness for the police officer who put her son in jail.

But not every police officer would have worked as hard as Richard May did to help a distraught mother get her son off drugs and on the right road.

May was shot to death Saturday in East Palo Alto. When Lucille Strong heard the news, she was devastated.

“They said a policeman was killed, and I prayed it wasn't officer May,” she said. “If it hadn't been for officer May, my son might have been dead by now.”

May died on a lovely Saturday afternoon. He was responding to a fairly routine call -- a fight in a restaurant.

According to police accounts, one of the guys involved in the fight ran off, and May, a powerful, 38-year-old ex-Marine, chased him down. They scuffled. Both men fired their guns. May was shot at least once in the head.

On Tuesday, Alberto Alvarez, 23, whom prosecutors call a known gang member, was charged with murder.

Strong and her husband raised five children in East Palo Alto, a city that long has struggled with drugs, gangs and violence.

Her youngest son was a smart kid with lots of potential. But somehow Ken, who's now 41, never quite managed to realize that potential. Three years ago, after two family members got sick and died within nine months, “he just kind of went crazy,” his mother said, and the drugs took over.

When Lucille Strong first met May in 2004, she didn't know where to turn. Her son had been breaking into her house, stealing to pay for his cocaine habit. May, who'd recently joined the East Palo Alto force, listened to her story and promised to help.

“He told me that no mother should have to endure what I was going through,” she said. “He said the only way my son could kick drugs was if he went to jail and was sent to a treatment program. He was too far gone to do it on his own.”

May told her how to collect evidence in case there was another break-in. Then he went out and tracked down her son.

“He stopped me and gave me a long talking-to,” Ken Strong recalled. “He didn't arrest me, but he put the fear of God in me.”

Apparently, though, that long talking-to and the fear of God couldn't match the power of coke. Strong was arrested shortly afterward for burglarizing his mother's house again and went to jail. After a couple of false starts, he's back in jail waiting to be placed in a residential drug treatment program. This time, he says, he's determined to make it.

“I'm so happy to be away from the life I was in.”

May went to court with Ken's mother throughout the burglary case and stayed in touch with her afterward. She feels he gave her son back to her, and her heart aches for his family. She hopes the city does something to keep his memory alive.

“Maybe they should name a street after him,” she said. “For him to take that much interest in my family was really something special.”

From what I've learned about May in the past couple of days, the concern he showed for the Strong family wasn't really something special for him. He was a cop who cared, who wanted to make a difference.

May was an ambitious guy who left the relative calm of Lompoc to get experience fighting urban crime in East Palo Alto. In his 18 months here, he impressed many folks with his commitment, his eagerness to keep young people out of gangs. Everyone who encountered him seems to have a story about how May went out of his way to help people.

If every cop who dies in the line of duty is a hero, then perhaps Richard May was a superhero.

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