

# Personal Protection

## Islanders look to bodyguards for safety

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Getting ready for work, he puts on a suit and tie before strapping on the holster holding his .38-caliber revolver.

Working as a "shadow," this Totteville man is never more than four feet from a client's side. Sometimes, he's called upon to act as an undercover backup guard during a particularly risky job.

Thomas Dougherty, once a Manhattan police officer, is now a level one security officer — better known as a personal bodyguard.

"I'm a hired deadly weapon who provides a service," he said, explaining that although violence doesn't often erupt, when it does, flashing his revolver is usually enough to quiet an antagonist.

While it's widely perceived that only celebrities and political leaders use personal protection, people on Staten Island have been enlisting the services of bodyguards in increasing numbers.

"We are fairly blessed on Staten Island, we have a low volume crime rate per capita compared to the other boroughs, but it's progressively getting worse," said John Gaspar, co-owner of APB Investigations in Meiers Corners.

Although the perception of crime preys on people's fears, Gaspar feels many people seek his services — at a rate ranging from \$26.50 to \$75 per hour — as a preventative measure.

Clients include women who are fearful that even a court's order of protection won't prevent spouses from harming them, and women preparing to file for divorce from possessive husbands.

Christina, a 20-year old Staten Islander, found herself in need of bodyguard services from APB after a two-year relationship with a married man turned sour.

Her life was disrupted by repeated phone calls, vandalism to her car and home, and visits from the man's wife, from whom he was separated.

"When she (the wife) first went crazy I tried to understand her point of view. When things turned sour, I had to sever the relationship (with the man)," said Christina.

After she attempted to break off the relationship, the man began to harass her.

"I felt very nervous. He hit me and he really hurt me and blackened my eye. I was only 18 when I met him," she remembers.

Christina eventually was served a summons from the Staten Island Mediation Court for harassment against the wife — an accusation she denied.

Fear that she would encounter her former lover, who had returned to his wife, prompted her to hire a bodyguard.

"I was petrified that he would follow me home and cause trouble, or cause trouble at the court," said Christina, who moved several times to escape the harassment.

"There wasn't anybody who could protect me from him, I needed a bodyguard," she said.

That's where Gaspar came in. He assigned a bodyguard who escorted her to and from court and booked up a recording device to her telephone, he also gave her advice on how to handle the situation if it erupted again.

"I kind of thought they (bodyguards) were killers and tough guys," Christina said, "and now I know

they are people who want to help other people. It sounds like something from a movie or book... but people should realize it's an option."

Gaspar also receives many calls for armed chauffeurs to escort international visitors.

"Someone comes over here from Japan and they don't want their 5-mm (camera) robbed in the village as they are going around taking pictures. We will act as an escort for them."

Although bodyguards will use any means necessary to protect a client, they generally rely on a quiet show of force.

"A great deal of crime is perception, but we do have enough and that's why there is a need for people like myself. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," he said.

Gaspar, whose private detective agency is licensed in four states, is a former New York City police officer and decorated detective. The majority of his staff members are former law enforcement personnel, including his partner, Valerie Finello.

State licenses grant bodyguards "freedom of not retreating," which means that while in the line of duty, they may react to an assailant with equal or greater force to control a situation.

"We can use physical and deadly force when necessary in order to accomplish what has to be done," said Gaspar, explaining that the state penal code provides ethics for guards.

For example, regulations allow bodyguards to detain an unruly individual until police arrive, but they are unable to make the arrest.

Tony Cimato, president of T.R. Securities in Great Kills, claimed that "Ninety nine and nine-tenths percent of the time" bodyguards employed by his company deter violent activity rather than act on it.

He said brains work better than brawn when it comes to guard work.

"You see, if I carry an Uzi someone will come over with a tank. You have to reach out through contacts and find out enough information," he said. "It's important to know your opposition."

Cimato, who has been working with four partners in the tri-state area for six years, said he only hires ex-law enforcement officers.

Working as a personal bodyguard means more than wearing a bulletproof vest or seeing yourself on the evening news escorting a famous client. Hard work and investigative smarts are a big part of the job, he said.

"When you are sitting in your car with crumbs from the sandwich you ate all over you for hours, or have to write a license plate number from a car that is speeding by you, on the cuff of your shirt, it's anything but glamorous," said Cimato.

Before taking on a long-term assignment, he always conducts a thorough background investigation of the prospective client.

"I would do a background check on you to find out your good points and bad. You have to know if he is married and has a mistress, does he have bad habits," Cimato explained.

"He (a client) could sit at the same (restaurant) table for 20 years, but now he may have a death threat on him. I must evaluate whether I want him in

# Lifestyle



public view. It's now our business to say to a waiter, 'don't place Mr. X at the normal table.'

Being followed by a guard can sometimes be frustrating for the client. With safety the main concern, he or she is no longer able to move about freely.

"Most of them resent it (lack of privacy); but if you are retained he (the client) knows that like a doctor, priest or lawyer everything we see is confidential," he explained.

In addition to being hired to protect individuals, bodyguards are frequently hired to watch large groups. For Gaspar, sending bodyguards to weddings and funerals is a large part of his service on the Island.

"Quite often I'm hired at weddings and funerals to offer the ability to keep the peace. We have had funerals and wakes that we had to exclude certain family members that were going to be destructive during the proceeding," he said.

He described instances when bodyguards prevented an ex-spouse from barging into a wedding ceremony or reception.

In addition, Cimato feels people are becoming increasingly concerned over the safety of brides and grooms after they are handed large cash wedding gifts.

"What are you going to do with the money at the end of the wedding?" asked Cimato, who cited numerous examples of couples robbed of their wedding gifts.

Bodyguards can also ensure the safety of the guests.

"You have guests that are coming in well dressed they are going to put their best jewelry on, carry a little extra pocket change," explained Cimato, who said many people forget security when planning a wedding.

Providing protection from violence is not the only role of a bodyguard, he said.

"What happens if people get sick at that wedding? Isn't it good to know that someone knows what to do in case of emergency, fire. What happens if someone needs CPR, which all of my men are trained in," he added.

Ralph DeCottibus, co-owner of T.R. Security, feels the Island is not the safe haven it was two decades ago.

"Just read the papers every day, there is a scourge of drugs and when people are smoking crack they do stupid things that they wouldn't ordinarily do," said the Great Kills resident.

"I'm not painting a bad picture of Staten Island, but everyone in Todt Hill, for example, has lights and alarm systems going 25 years ago this just didn't exist.

"This is very interesting work, but you become a little jaded," he said. "You don't really get shocked by things you are asked to do."



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John Gaspar  
APB Investigations



John Gaspar and Valerie Finello of APB Investigations of Meiers Corners discuss a case.

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