

Det. Robert Cardona



Det. Robert Cardona was the DEA Delegate from the 13 Squad, representing dozens of members of the union since he first won the Delegate election on November 30, 2015.

He was born March 30, 1979, and grew up in Spanish Harlem on the upper east side of Manhattan. Cardona was only 11 years old

when he lost his mother Evelyn to cancer in 1990. His father, a shop steward of the USA — the Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association — took courses in cooking so he could take care of his three children, and ultimately Roberto Cardona became an accomplished chef of Spanish cuisine, a skill he took back to his own job.

"I think I spent most of my years as a Sanitation steward cooking," Roberto laughs, noting by the time New York's Strongest would return to the garage, he would have the next meal ready for them. Roberto was a union Delegate for the USA for more than two decades. He worked on negotiating contracts through four mayors and instilled in his son a reverence and respect for civil service and for organized labor.

Robert went to the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics and Long Island University's Brooklyn campus, and became the first cop in his family. That, too, was his father's influence.

"I told him policing was a great job. Robert liked to work with others," his father says, "and being a City worker myself, I encouraged him and told him civil service had great opportunities. There were many avenues to police

work and he enjoyed that aspect of it: the fact that he could grow with the job. He would get to meet and help a lot of people."

Cardona was appointed to the New York Police Department at the beginning of July 2001, in the same class as Raymond Abear, and shortly after two months, with the rest of the Department, he was processing the devastation of the World Trade Center attacks, something that would come back to haunt his health years later.

In March 2002, Cardona was appointed to PSA #5, and a month later reassigned to PSA #4, where he became the unit's PBA Delegate and where he remained until 2007, when he was transferred to the 7 Squad as a white shield on the Detective track. During his Anti-Crime assignment in Housing, Cardona met Det. Jose Toala, and the two worked together later in the 7 Squad.

"Rob was always about doing the right thing for other people," Toala says, "and he never needed the recognition. We had a lot in common, because our backgrounds were similar, so we hit it off. Rob was Puerto Rican and I'm Ecuadorean. I'm from Queens, but Rob's childhood in Spanish Harlem made him very empathetic for the population of the lower east side, where we worked. He could identify with, and felt for, the Spanish community. Rob was very humble. He never forgot where he came from."

Robert's father bought property in Pennsylvania, and eventually moved to the Poconos where his children could experience the best of both worlds: the gritty, fast pace of the tough inner city, and the fresh air of the rural mountains. "I felt that seeing both sides would help my kids in their careers and in life," he says. "Robert could see that we were experiencing the American dream, and that's what it was."

"And he loved salsa, and he could dance!" Toala exclaims, recounting his nicknamed for Cardona was "Mr.

Copacabana," because of Rob's expertise on the dance floor. "I wouldn't get out there if Rob was dancing!" Toala still laughs at being intimidated by his friend's natural rhythm. "And Rob loved music. Rob was so proud of his car speakers, they were really loud. You could tell when he was pulling up to the stationhouse, because the windows on the second floor would rattle."

Another of Cardona's passions was riding motorcycles. During those early PSA and 7 Squad years, he rode with his close friend Det. Doug Corso, now with the Drug Enforcement Task Force. The two first met in PSA #4, but have been "like family," Corso says, for 15 years. "We would go out after work and relax and socialize, and we both wound up getting motorcycles. When the warm, summer months hit, we would go out on rides together, or we'd go to boxing events, or sometimes Giants games and tailgate parties. We had a lot of interests in common." Through the years, he and Cardona would enjoy memorial rides and other motorcycle runs.

"Rob would always try to give me good advice," Corso relates. "Rob was that person who would never judge you. Whatever I decided to do, if I took his advice or not, he would support whatever I did. He was a great friend. One of a kind. And he worked hard."

On June 26, 2009, that hard work earned Cardona his gold shield at the 7 Squad.

"He was a great problem solver," Corso adds, "very well-liked and respected. He gave me the confidence to buy my

house. I was a bit nervous about it, but he gave me the confidence to make the investment. Rob was always there helping me out. He would always find the time."

That desire to help others is the quality that makes a person a good fit for organized labor. "When Robert first got into it," says his father, "we had a long conversation about it. Being a union rep puts you in a position where you can help a lot of people and work with your fellow members. Robert enjoyed helping people and putting them on the right path. He knew with union work he could be a mentor to others."

In April 2013, Cardona was reassigned to Detective Borough Manhattan South Operations where he remained until July 2015, when he transferred to his final command: the 13 Squad. By November of that year, he was elected the Squad's Delegate.

"Rob always stood up for his fellow cops, and he looked out for the younger cops," Toala says. "And Rob didn't tolerate the bullies, no matter what rank they were. He called them out for it ... *respectfully*, but he stood up to them. And that made him perfect for his Delegate's position."

In late 2014, Robert reconnected with his love and friend of 17-plus years, Mary Magagna, who remained by his side until his last day. "We first met in 1998, when we worked together in a pharmacy in the neighborhood where Robert grew up," she explains, "and Robert was

waiting to be called up for the Police Academy."

Mary says, "We were best friends, soul mates, always there for each other. Our relationship eventually came full circle. We always had that spark and that close connection," she relates, "a relationship and love built on trust, loyalty, and respect."



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The couple lived together in Yonkers, and every other weekend their lives revolved around Robert's son from a previous relationship, Robert, Jr., nicknamed "RJ," who turns nine years old at the end of 2020.



"Robert's main priority was always his son," Mary says. And when father and son were together they attended Sunday mass and religious education classes, practiced karate, basketball, learned and practiced how to swim, ride a bike, and drive a go-kart. They enjoyed bike riding in the park, playing sports, and going to the beach. "Robert always explained to RJ the importance of doing well in school, being

a team player, and instilling in him to give everything 'his best.' He would say, 'You will never lose. You'll either win or learn.'"

Robert enjoyed spending time with his family, which includes several generations: his older sister Stephanie and her daughter SkyLynn; his younger sister Stacey, her son Jeremy, and twins King and Cecilia. Robert's father eventually remarried: he and his wife Maribel completed the family with Robert's younger brother Mitchell.

"Robert was dedicated, had an immense love and was very close to his family," says Mary, "with daily contact either via phone, text, or video, and ending each conversation with, 'I love you.' Robert kept the family connected — grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, near and far. He was the one you could always depend on to be there in a time of need. He had a tight bond with his childhood friends and their families, which are an extension of Rob's family."

But along with enjoying time with family and friends, boxing was Cardona's other great joy, which he also shared and passed on to his son. He wasn't a fighter himself, but every chance he got, he watched the sport. "We even took a trip to Philadelphia," Mary says, "to see the *Rocky* statue. Taking photos posed in front of the statue was a *must*. Robert was very committed to work, and dedicated to friends and family, but when he had any time available, if he couldn't attend a match personally, he'd invite people over and stage an event around a televised one."

Corso adds that Cardona hosted joyous backyard events: screening the boxing matches through a projector TV, with an outdoor bar for libation. So persuasive was Cardona, that, Corso laughs and admits, "He even got me to try different varieties of whiskey, until I found one that I actually liked."

With his easy-going, laid back personality, what people think of most when they think of Robert Cardona was his laugh. "His laugh was very contagious," Mary says. "If you walked into a room and Robert was laughing, you didn't have to know what the laughter was about," she says, "just hearing him laugh would make you laugh, too."

"Rob had tons of friends. He was one of those people you could always depend on. Even in the middle of the night," adds Corso. "In November of 2019, my grandfather passed away. We were very close, and it was Rob who guided me through that loss and convinced me to speak at his funeral to let others know of the impact and influence my grandfather had on me and my life. 'Don't miss out on this opportunity,' Rob said. 'You will regret it later on.' And I thank him for that. He was always 100% there for me. I could always count on him. He had tremendous love and dedication to his son and family."

That sentiment is echoed by Toala: "Rob cared a lot about his friends, he had a big heart. He loved Mary and RJ. His son was his pride and joy."

In 2019, Cardona made a run for the DEA Manhattan South Welfare Officer spot, but his campaigning was cut short by a bout with a stomach virus. Earlier, Cardona had been diagnosed with 9/11-related leukemia, which was managed over the years with medication.

"When we found out Rob had cancer, it was devastating," says his father. "But he overcame that. He was a strong individual. He passed through a lot of hurdles, and experienced a lot of hurt. He was always a positive person. He never let anything stop him. He became the man he became through all the adversity. And we were blessed."

Cardona would bring his family to visit his father in Pennsylvania often. "He would tell me what he wanted to eat. He was a big guy with a big appetite," Roberto laughs. His father made the Spanish dishes his son favored, including ox tails in red wine sauce and chicken cutlet in garlic gravy. And Corso says both he and Cardona had plans to exchange their love of motorcycles for the sport of riding dirt bikes, which they could tool around in the rural Poconos. But the plan was interrupted by the pandemic.

"Rob did go for a medical visit when he felt under the weather," says Mary. "They said he had influenza. He was given a prescription and, at first, his fever was low. For a few days it was simply minor. But after a few days, he didn't feel any better. He just got worse, and from there was admitted to the hospital. He was diagnosed with COVID-related pneumonia. It progressed until it was too difficult to treat. We remained positive and hopeful. We had moments of highs and lows. They turned off the respirator to test his response, and he was doing alright, but doctors felt they had to turn it back on. A few days later, his fever spiked and he went into shock, along with other complications."

"Rob never wanted anyone to think there was anything wrong with him," Corso says. "Rob was very strong. He wasn't a work-out buff, but he was always a strong, powerful guy."

"When it came to cold-like symptoms," Mary says, "Rob went to work even if he wasn't feeling well, and he would sleep it off over the weekend. But at this point, with this illness, no one really knew much."

On April 15, 2020, Robert Cardona passed away. He had just turned 41 years old on March 30th.

"I couldn't have asked for a better friend," said Corso.

"People try to make sense out of this," says Mary, "but for the people who lost loved ones, there is no way anyone can ever make this right."

The notion that a man so vibrant, who survived so many life tragedies, including the loss of his mother, and living with a 9/11-related cancer, was felled by a microscopic enemy is something his friends and family find it hard to grapple with. "How did something that started around the world come knocking at our door?" Mary wonders. "The phases we go through are never in order," she says. "It is all still so unreal to me, to his siblings, and his family. A memory or thought of Rob comes to mind; we share it amongst ourselves or simply come right out and say that we miss him and love him. Robert was so young, so full of life, and the center of ours. He was a gentle giant with a heart of gold."

"There are no words that I could write to describe my feelings," says Cardona's sister Stacey. "I will forever carry my brother in my heart. It was funny when meeting some of the other Detectives when they said, 'Oh! You were the one he was always on Facetime with!' All I could do was smile and simply reply, 'yes.'"

"My world will never be the same," she continues. "My brother always told me, 'She built us for this,' referencing our mom any time he and I faced any hardships in life. But, she did not build me for this. My *brother* did — *he's* the one who gave me courage, strength, confidence, and a tremendous amount of love that I will forever cherish and be grateful for. I promise to keep my brother alive in the hearts of his niece and nephews."

"The weekends were always our time to be together," Stacey continues, "especially in the summer. Rob would call or text me very early in the morning, because my nephew RJ was always up super-early when he was with his dad. He'd say, 'It's going to be nice today, come with the kids. I miss you guys. RJ wants empanadas, beef and cheese!'"

"There are thousands of stories that I can tell about my brother, and even a hundred more that others can tell. And at the core of all of the stories is *love*. There wasn't anything that we wouldn't do for each other, to protect each other. He was and is my big brother, my own personal warrior."

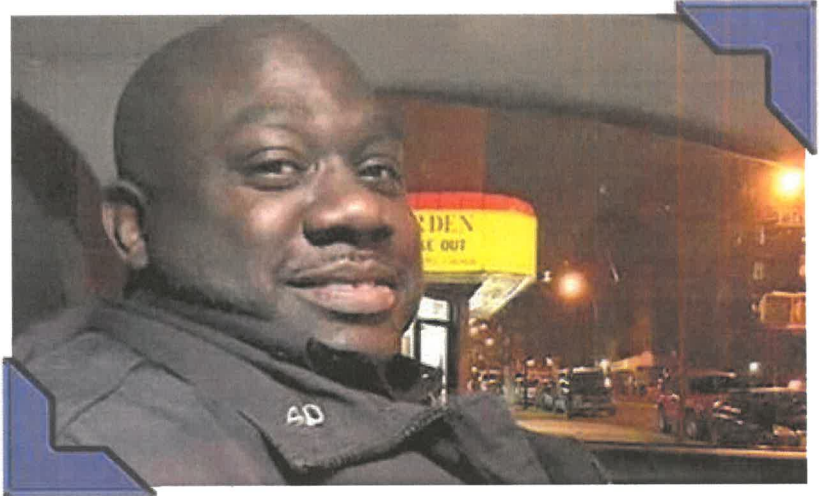
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days later, he went home sick and stayed home, but it turned out he was rushed to the hospital. Within two or three days, Cedric was gone. They woke me up at the dorm to give me the news. I was dumbfounded. I was so overtaken by the moment. We never considered that he wouldn't recover. It also really hurt that we couldn't give him a proper wake or funeral, given the pandemic regulations of the City and the State."

"He didn't want the attention, and he never wanted anyone to make a fuss over him," his wife Kyra relates, "but I find myself now talking about him all the time." Kyra appreciates, she says, the attention the union, Paul DiGiacomo, and Cedric's colleagues have been showering on the family. "Everyone has reached out, and everyone has been wonderful, despite the quarantine," she says. "And my house is still filled with machines that Cedric brought home to repair for people, and I am not sure who they belong to, because he was in the middle of fixing them when he took ill."



Kyra assesses her husband this way: "Cedric was a wonderful man. He loved our children, and he loved my mother, who lives near us, and she loved him." She quotes her mother, Sandra Stevens, as summing up Cedric's life this way: "He was simply the nicest man I have ever known."

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Robert's sister Stephanie adds, "Robert was a great father and brother. He was a great dancer, and always loved to have gatherings with family and friends. Robert was always front and center when people needed him, no questions asked. I remember the day when he called me to tell me he was going to the Police Academy, and being his big sister, I was so scared my little brother was going to be a cop. But I have to say, I was so proud of him on his graduation day."

"We lost our mother to a blood cancer, and when Robert told me of his similar diagnosis, the news hit us hard. But, my brother assured me he was going to be okay."

"Robert was there for me when I gave birth to my daughter. He was full of support," Stephanie continues. "He had a great sense of humor and made lots of jokes. His favorite saying was, 'get over it!' He will always and forever be in my heart, and I will celebrate him every day of my life."

Cardona's niece SkyLynn also notes, "My uncle wasn't someone to play with when it came to school. He simply wanted me to do well, and wanted the best for me. And when it came to family, if you ever needed something, he was a call away and very quick with a call back. He was an amazing friend, uncle, brother, son and father. I love you, Tio Robert."

"I take it day by day," says Cardona's father. "Robert was a great son. He was humble. He liked everyone. He would take the time to help people, give them advice, and put them on the right path, the right direction. He made me very, very proud. All the memories I have of my son are good ones. But God must have had something more important for him to do."

"I miss him every day," his father says. "He was my hero."