

Motive murky for Blues executive who allegedly gunned down co-workers year after surviving WTC terrorist attack

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NEW YORK (AP) — On only his second day as an insurance executive at the World Trade Center, John Harrison survived the deadliest terrorist attack in the nation's history. One year later, Harrison was at the center of another workplace slaughter. This time, police say, the one-time FBI agent did the killing.

What happened to Harrison between his escape from the doomed North Tower on Sept. 11, 2001, and the shooting at his new office in Times Square, where he allegedly used two guns to kill two co-workers and then fired a fatal shot into his mouth, remains a mystery to those who knew him.

One colleague, William Mahon, described Harrison as "a very steady-going, unflappable" person, devoted to fighting insurance fraud but quiet about his private life.

"He had a very calm demeanor all the time," said Mahon, executive director of the National Health Care Anti-Fraud Association in Washington D.C. "He was considered a leader in our organization."

A former prosecutor, Jerome Ballarotto, told reporters his "fine, clear-thinking" friend "had an appreciation of human life."

Messages left at Harrison's home in New Jersey were not returned, but his family reportedly has said he was traumatized by the events of Sept. 11. Co-workers spoke of unexpected behavior in recent weeks, including leaving his wife and going on a crash diet.

Police say the motive for the Sept. 16 murder-suicide at Empire Blue Cross and Blue Shield may always remain murky.

Investigators recovered an e-mail indicating one of Harrison's victims, Isabel Munoz, wanted to end a relationship with him. But they have backed away from early speculation that he was on the losing end of a love triangle involving the other victim, Vincent LaBianca.

Police say the families of both victims denied an affair.

"We have no sightings, no notes — nothing beyond rumor that suggests a romantic connection," said a police official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "The love triangle might have been in (Harrison's) head."

On Sept. 12, Harrison received an e-mail from Munoz informing him, "It's not going to work out," police said.

Harrison was carrying a printout of the e-mail along with two handguns in a bag the morning of the shooting. He summoned Munoz and LaBianca to his small corner office on the 11th floor. LaBianca brought a notepad and cup of coffee.

Then, at about 8:30 a.m., Harrison opened fire.

About two weeks before the shootings, Harrison moved out of his home in Mount Pleasant, N.J., and into an apartment in hopes of continuing his relationship with Munoz, police said.

He had also recently begun a bread-and-water diet and a workout regimen of long walks aimed at shedding some weight from his 250-pound frame, according to co-workers. Harrison joined Philadelphia's police force in 1970 and left eight years later to join the FBI in Trenton.

In 1989, he retired to become a private investigator. He was hired last year by Empire Blue Cross as an assistant vice president to run the firm's fraud investigations unit.

Harrison reported for work on Sept. 10, 2001. When terrorists flew a jetliner into the World Trade Center tower the next day, he, Munoz and LaBianca fled with other employees from their offices between the 17th and 31st floors.

Empire Blue Cross officials, which lost nine employees that day, said the company made sure any employee who needed counseling got it.

Munoz, 36, and LaBianca, 34, were among 25 employees working for Harrison in the anti-fraud unit, which was relocated to Times Square.

Harrison had been stoic when asked about being a survivor, Mahon said.

"He didn't wear it on his sleeve, but you didn't feel like you could never broach the subject," he said. p