

Old Austin District police station inspires memories

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ABSTRACT

Richardson, now the chief of police for the University of Illinois at Chicago, recalled a time when a transformer behind the building was struck by lightning, knocking out telephone service and when the locker room had to be cordoned off to accommodate the first female officers.

FULL TEXT

Chicago police Lt. Steven Regnier was nostalgic as he sat back in his watch commander's chair in the West Side's Austin District station and looked at two bricks resting on his desk.

They were souvenirs from the old Austin station that was razed last month, 93 years after its construction at 5327 W. Chicago Ave. The city plans to build a facility at the location to provide services to adolescent parents and their children.

Regnier worked at the old station from when he was a recruit in 1986 until he made sergeant 10 years later. Now a lieutenant assigned to Austin's current digs at Madison Street and Menard Avenue, he recalled the place's old radiators, musty stench and "worn out" stairs by the officers' entrance at the rear of the building. The area behind the front desk was cramped, and paperwork took a long time to type up in the days before computers.

"It's what you remember from seeing (similar stations) in movies and television, old shows. ... It's what a police station was," Regnier said.

For a district that has long had one of Chicago's highest crime rates, the former station had only two places to process arrestees. It wasn't until the end of his first stint in the district that Regnier realized how much the old station wasn't suited for Austin, community policing or processing the number of arrests made by its officers. But it was, after all, those shortcomings that gave the old station its charm.

"Glass cabinets hidden behind lockers, bookcases built into the wall that you never knew were there until you started moving stuff around. ... It was kind of like working in a museum," said Lt. Allison Schloss, who was stationed there from 2002 until it closed in 2005.

John Richardson, who started his career there in 1970 before returning in the mid-1990s as the Austin District's commander, also has vivid memories of the place.

Richardson, now the chief of police for the University of Illinois at Chicago, recalled a time when a transformer behind the building was struck by lightning, knocking out telephone service and when the locker room had to be cordoned off to accommodate the first female officers.

The station experienced its share of odd and tragic events as well.

In 1988, a former mental patient walked into the station, snatched a loaded revolver from an officer's holster and held it cocked to his head for 25 minutes before other officers could intervene.

Rookie Officer Daniel Doffyn was shot and killed while responding to a burglary call across the street from the station in March 1995.

Then late the next year, the Police Department was rocked when seven tactical officers assigned to the Austin

District were accused of shaking down an undercover cop posing as a drug dealer.

While he may not miss the physical building itself, Regnier said its demolition sparked recollections of a "different sense of camaraderie" with his fellow officers from that era.

"Looking back, it was an old building. But when we worked in it, it didn't feel like an old building," said Regnier, who misses the cramped quarters, clutter and character of the old place. "These new (stations) all seem foreign."

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Credit: By Jeremy Gerner, Tribune reporter

Illustration

Caption: Photo (color): Part of the old Austin District police station is on display in the foyer of the new station at 5701 W. Madison St. MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

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