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Sheriff’s investigative team honored by Anti-Defamation League for Blaze Bernstein case

SANTA ANA, Ca. (March 9, 2020): A team of Orange County Sheriff’s Department personnel will be recognized by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) for their investigative work on the 2018 murder of 19-year-old Blaze Bernstein.

The ADL on March 10, 2020 will award the investigations team the prestigious Helene & Joseph Sherwood Family Prize for Combating Hate. This honor recognizes law enforcement efforts that go above and beyond in minimizing the severity of hate-motivated behavior in the community.

Blaze Bernstein, a Jewish Lake Forest native, was fatally stabbed in January 2018. Bernstein was last seen on January 2, 2018 and was reported missing by his family January 3, 2018.

Investigators found Bernstein’s body in Borrego Park in Lake Forest on January 9, 2018. Samuel Woodward, 22, of Newport Beach was arrested on suspicion of murder on January 12, 2018.

After Woodward’s arrest, investigators tirelessly pursued leads that the murder potentially involved a hate crime component. They dedicated months of work and discovered Woodward allegedly belonged to the Atomwaffen Division, a national neo-Nazi extremist group that has been linked to violent crime.

As a direct result of the work of the investigations team, the Orange County District Attorney’s Office announced August 2, 2018 it would be adding a hate-crime enhancement to Woodward’s charges.

“Blaze’s tragic murder devastated his family and our community as a whole. The loss felt by those who knew and loved Blaze is unimaginable,” said Don Barnes, Orange County Sheriff-Coroner. “The tenacious efforts and relentless pursuit of justice by the investigative team sent a clear message to our county: Hate will not be tolerated here.”

The investigations team, along with other law enforcement agencies, will be honored at a ceremony at 11:30 a.m. March 10, 2020 at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles.