

# The Cop Counselor

Peter Killeen left the police force to become a Franciscan friar. Today, as a psychotherapist, he comes to the aid of troubled officers.

BY ANTHONY BRUNO

THE TRAFFIC ON ROUTE 3 IN THE "Meadowlands is backed up farther than Peter Killeen can see. He's sitting behind the wheel of his Chevy Malibu, inching toward the Lincoln Tunnel. Up ahead, state troopers are diverting traffic onto the Turnpike and away from the tunnel, but Killeen knows he will be let through. Each time he pulls to a stop, his eyes automatically move to the Manhattan skyline in the distance. Massive clouds of smoke and dust smear the clear blue sky where the twin towers of the World Trade Center had stood that morning. It's mid-afternoon, September 11, 2001.

Killeen has been summoned to the Port Authority Police command center on West Street in lower Manhattan, within walking distance of Ground Zero. He's been called to offer support and counseling to shell shocked cops. When he finally arrives, he finds a roomful of guilt and self-recrimination. "Why did I make it out and my partner didn't?" one cop asks over and over. "My buddy was in there when number two went down," another cop says. "He has three kids. I have three kids."



Killeen at an impromptu memorial to the victims of the World Trade Center attack.

A distraught lieutenant is sobbing. "My entire command is missing!" he cries.

According to Killeen, the atmosphere in that room is "dazed and malaise." He knows many of these people, so few introductions are necessary. Some come to him, knowing that he's someone they can talk to. He approaches the most visibly shaken and tries to get them to open up.

Over the next ten hours Killeen will hear stories of horror and maddening frustration: the elation of finding someone's hand sticking out of the rubble, hoping that person is somehow still alive, then discovering that it's a hand without a body. There are other horrifying visions. One cop was on the street when people started falling from the sky. He saw an office worker hit a lamppost, his body shattering

into a downpour of body parts, his organs hitting the pavement with a sound like "pumpkins smashing." Killeen listens to everything these cops want to share, helping them cope with a tragedy that is beyond comprehension. But as he listens, he also thinks about the men and women who are missing, wondering how many of them were in the most recent graduating class of the Port Authority Police Academy.

LAST SPRING KILLEEN HAD ADDRESSED THAT class at the State Police academy in Sea Girt. The cadets filled the seats in the auditorium, their gray uniforms crisp and fresh. Killeen stood at the podium, looking over them like a shepherd watching his flock. He knew what they were feeling at that moment. Once upon a time he was one of them. "I want you to listen carefully to what I have to say," Killeen said into the microphone.

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People

Reprinted from People magazine –  
December 2001

"There are going to be times when you might get jammed up out on the street for some reason and you will have difficulty dealing with the pressure. You will feel as though your department and supervisors are not supporting you. Remember these words from this day forward: Find someone to talk to, someone you can trust"

For more than 300 police officers, detectives, and federal agents, Peter Killeen has been that someone. Working as a psychotherapist from his office in Little Falls, he sees cops who are having trouble handling the pressures of the job. Killeen is uniquely qualified for what he does.

Besides having been a police officer, he was also a Franciscan friar. Killeen not only knows cops, he knows how to listen to them, and, most important, he cares about them.

Killeen, 48, was born in Jersey City and grew up in Lyndhurst and Wayne. He graduated from William Paterson College with an undergraduate degree in criminal justice, then entered the Port Authority Police Academy where he graduated as president of his class.

Police work is apparently in his DNA. His Father was a Port Authority cop, his grandfather was a cop in Jersey City, and his brother is a Port Authority cop.

His own law-enforcement career began in 1975 when the Peat Authority assigned him to LaGuardia Airport in New York City, where he patrolled the terminals. On one memorable shift he had to deal with the chaos that ensued when a bomb exploded in a public locker and killed eleven people. But after two years on the police force,

Killeen felt a higher calling beckoning and left to become a Franciscan friar. He had always been interested in the history of the Franciscans, and he felt that he could serve people better as a friar. He was sent first to the Bronx, then Brookline, Massachusetts, and finally Washington, D.C. During that time he earned a degree in psychology from Loyola College and a degree in theology from the Washington Theological Union. "My decision to become a friar was not a rejection of police work," Killeen says. "I saw it as a continuation of what I was doing as a cop."

Killeen's life took another big turn in 1980, when he took a year's leave of absence from the Franciscans to reassess his goals. He knew that he wanted to help people, but he felt limited because he was always bound to a single parish. Law enforcement was in his blood, and he yearned to get back into it in some way. So after nine years as a friar, he left the order and hung out his shingle -

with a specific mission in mind: to help cops in distress. Port Authority Police Benevolent Association First Vice President George Lorenz says of Killeen, "Peter works for the [Port Authority PBA] officers with only their well-being in mind. I feel that the ability of our members to call upon Peter at any time, for many different reasons, is an invaluable service."

Killeen's clients express typical troubles and complaints—stress, anxiety, anger, depression, fear, alcohol and/or drug abuse, marital difficulties, sexual dysfunction. They're often the victims of peer harassment, job discrimination, abuse from the public, bias, and gross misunderstanding. Some cry out for help while others have to be pried open. Some are grateful to have Killeen on their side, others are resentful. And a few have even tried to use Killeen to work the system to get undeserved disability benefits.

"I'm not a hand-holder," Killeen says sitting at his desk sipping coffee from a mug. He's tall and broad-shouldered, with striking blue eyes and an open smile. "I don't try to get into a cop's head," he says. "Whatever a client gives me, I just try to make sense of it and give it back to him." On the wall to Killeen's left hangs a framed photograph of a statue of St. Patrick in Roscommon, Ireland. His father's family emigrated from there...

to America. On his right hangs a black-and-white photo of him in his Port Authority Police uniform, standing with his father. It was taken the day Killeen graduated from the academy. Because he was once a cop, he doesn't get caught up in the "cop staff—the guns, the perps, the arrests—the way other therapists frequently do. He already knows about all that. Instead, he seeks to get beyond the uniform to the individual. Often he will use theology to "fill a void," he says, in a troubled cop's dire outlook on life, but he never preaches. "Basically, cops aren't spiritual," he says. Some of his clients will "unload" on him, telling him everything that's bothering them. "But I can't absolve them of their sins the way a priest can. If a cop is feeling guilty about something, I will refer him to a priest".

The room where Killeen sees his clients contains a rocking chair and a sofa. The colors of the upholstery and carpeting are light earth tones. The pleasant neutrality of the room belies the heartache and inner turmoil that have been spilled here. Killeen recalls one young cop who ran into an emotional buzz-saw when he challenged his department's longstanding practice of granting overtime to favored cops. Killeen supported him throughout his two-and-a-half-year struggle with the department. After being suspended from the force, the officer continued to fight, suing

the city. An out-of-court settlement now appears to be in the works.

"I had to keep him focused so that he could function from day to day," Killeen says. "I had to give him a sense of hope when everything around him seemed desperately hopeless."

Killeen admits that he's unabashedly "pro-cop." "Cops don't trust civilians or anyone else, for that matter," he says. "They're taught not to trust or else they'll be hurt" He points to the character of Andy Sipowicz, the crusty, often difficult veteran detective played by Dennis Franz on the television drama *NYPD Blue*, as an accurate portrayal of the kind of police mentality he confronts everyday. "You can't be psychological with a guy like Sipowicz. He'll walk right out the door. You've got to let him run things and slip in the shrinky stuff when you can.... He's the type who might show up at my office from time to time, but always at the insistence of his wife. Or at least that's what he'll say. My goal with someone like this is to teach him how to ask questions that will make him more accountable for his own behavior."

Though the "burned-out cop" is the most typical client Killeen sees, he has had unusual cases, such as the Port Authority cop who suffered from flashbacks after being caught in the World...

Trade Center explosion in 1993. Killeen's dedication to law enforcement extends to the airwaves. He hosts a radio talk show called *The Police Connection*, which until recently was broadcast on WEVD 1050 AM in Manhattan. The program, which Killeen hopes will be back on air soon, is an open forum for anything that relates to law enforcement. His guests have included "Mindhunter" John Douglas, who established the FBI's method of criminal profiling; former Los Angeles detective and controversial witness in the O. J. Simpson trial Mark Fuhrman; and best-selling mystery writers Patricia Cornwell, Edna Buchanan, Maty Higgins Clark, and Carol Higgins Clark. Killeen also is a founding partner in Jersey Guys Productions, a company formed to develop quality television and feature-film entertainment relating to law enforcement.

"Peter is so easy to talk to," says one of his former clients, a cop with fifteen years's experience. "He can be counseling you and you don't even know it. But the thing about Peter is that he's genuine, genuinely concerned." So concerned that he found the time even during his initial ten-hour stint at the Port Authority command center on the day the World Trade Center was destroyed to return a call he received on his pager. It was from a friend, a young woman whose husband worked...

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for the New York City Fire Department. The woman told Killeen that her husband was missing, and she feared the worst. She was home alone on Staten Island with her two-year-old child, trying to tough out a gut-wrenching situation. She wanted her parents to be with her, but they live in New Jersey and all the bridges and tunnels were dosed to civilian traffic. Killeen promised to see what he could do. He made a few calls and found a sergeant on the Goethals Bridge. He agreed to let the woman's parents cross over, and they made it to their daughter that night.

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Anthony Bruno wrote about Richard Kuldinski, an organized-crime hitman and subject of an HBO documentary, in October.