



HE WAS BORN TO PROTECT AND SERVE

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As a teenager growing up in Paterson, N.J., in the early '70s, Bernie Kerik was obsessed with karate.

"At that particular time, there were Bruce Lee flicks around, and everybody was kickin' garbage cans and trees. But he really loved it," recalled Rick Harris, a childhood friend who lived around the corner from Kerik in what was a mostly black and Hispanic town.

Harris recalls Kerik - "We called him 'Beasley,' and I think it was his mom's pet name for him," he said - working in a local drugstore after school and then studying martial arts, taking on neighborhood kids as students after he perfected his craft.

"He had about 16 kids he would teach" for free, Harris said yesterday. "The karate helped him. Back in our day, it was your reputation. If you were good with your hands, you were respected in life alone.

"He never walked around with his chest stuck out [in pride], and everybody loved him."

Yesterday, the man once known to his friends as Beasley the karate expert became known to everyone as New York City's 40th police commissioner, the man who will serve Mayor Giuliani through the end of the mayoral term.

The 44-year-old former NYPD detective, who has a high-school equivalency diploma

and some college, will have a heavy burden to bear as the top cop of the nation's largest police department.

But with a rsum listing jobs ranging from military policeman to head of investigations for the Saudi Arabian royal family's medical facility, Kerik's friends say his "workaholism" and career versatility make him an easy fit for the commissioner's slot.

"He's extremely dedicated - 24 hours a day doesn't faze him," gushed his wife, Halah, outside their Riverdale home. "He's gonna be the best police commissioner this city ever had."

And they point to the numbers showing crime is down among inmates in his time as city Correction commissioner as proof of what he can do.

"Bernie Kerik knows the foot cop's story, knows the detective's story and knows the boss' story," said Sgt. Jerry Kane, who worked with Kerik in Midtown South narcotics in the late '80s. "He's going to be able to relate to all those people."

Indeed, Kerik's first hours as the newly anointed commish were spent zooming from a charity event for wounded cops and their families to a roll call at the Midtown South precinct, where he used to work.

AND what does he do in his spare time?

"Work. I don't think he has much spare time," said Jerry Speziale Jr., the chief of the New Hope, Pa., police department who used to work with Kerik when they were NYPD cops assigned to the Drug Enforcement Administration in the early '90s.

"You know where the spare time is - at his office, having lunch."

The son of a machinist in a dye factory, Kerik dropped out of Eastside HS before his senior year ended and enlisted in the Army, where he became an MP.

A general noticed the well-dressed Kerik and reassigned the karate black belt to give martial-arts training for Special Forces. From there, he made his way to Saudi Arabia, where he became the chief of investigations for one of the royal family's medical units.

By the early '80s, he came back to New Jersey, where he took a job working under Passaic County Sheriff Edwin Englehardt, whose leadership Kerik later criticized, as the jail warden.

Kerik then decided he wanted to take a massive pay cut and cross the river to become a cop with the NYPD.

The only problem was he couldn't get anyone at the city Department of Personnel to stay on the phone with him long enough to get application information. Angry, Kerik wrote a letter to then-Mayor Ed Koch, who wrote back and sent several application forms.

In 1986, he was on his way, a beat cop walking 42nd Street during the height of the crack epidemic before he became an undercover drug cop - growing his hair long and piercing his ears for the part.

"Bernie is the best street cop I ever saw out there," Kane said. "I would spot things all the time. Bernie would spot things I would never spot."

Kerik also became active in helping families of slain cops during his off-hours. One cause he worked hard for was as chairman of the Michael John Buczek Foundation, a group, named for a murdered cop, that gives out five scholarships each year.

It was at a foundation fund-raiser in Wayne, N.J., about 13 years ago that Kerik met another aggressive law-enforcement official - then- U.S. Attorney Rudy Giuliani.

Kerik was impressed that the prosecutor cared enough to attend the dinner, and the two hit it off. When Giuliani ran for office a few years later, Kerik provided security for the Republican candidate.

When Giuliani was elected in 1993, he named Kerik as first deputy commissioner of the Correction Department, which he eventually took over in 1998 - and won constant praise for turning around an agency that was marked for decades by chaos and mismanagement.

YESTERDAY, on Buczek's birthday, Giuliani tapped Kerik once again - ending two weeks of speculation about who would follow outgoing Commissioner Howard Safir. Speziale said Kerik dotes on his son, Joey, 15, and his 5-month-old daughter, Celine. "If he had to go to Rikers Island, if he showed up on Christmas Eve, Joey'd be with him," Speziale said.

And while Kerik wanted to be the head of the department where he was once a beat cop, his life would have gone on just the same if Giuliani had looked elsewhere, friends said.

"I'll tell you one thing about Bernie Kerik," Speziale said. "If he didn't get it, he would have got up [Sunday] morning and drove over to his office and continued on his path."