



Friday, July 13, 2007 - Page updated at 02:03 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

D.C. mugger turns out to be a hugger

By Allison Klein
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — A grand feast of marinated steaks and jumbo shrimp was winding down, and a group of friends was sitting on the back patio of a Capitol Hill home, sipping red wine. Suddenly, a hooded man slid in through an open gate and put the barrel of a handgun to the head of a 14-year-old girl.

"Give me your money, or I'll start shooting," he demanded, according to Washington, D.C., police and witness accounts.

The five other guests, including the girl's parents, froze — and then one spoke.

"We were just finishing dinner," Cristina "Cha Cha" Rowan, 43, blurted out. "Why don't you have a glass of wine with us?"

The intruder took a sip of their Château Malescot St.-Exupéry and said, "Damn, that's good wine."

The girl's father, Michael Rabdau, 51, who described the harrowing evening in an interview, told the intruder to take the whole glass. Rowan offered him the bottle. The would-be robber, his hood now down, took another sip and had a bite of Camembert cheese that was on the table.

Then he tucked the gun into the pocket of his nylon sweatpants.

"I think I may have come to the wrong house," he said, looking around the patio.

"I'm sorry," he told the group. "Can I get a hug?"

Rowan, who lives in Falls Church, Va., and works part time at her children's school, stood up and wrapped her arms around him. Then it was Rabdau's turn. Then his wife's. The other two guests complied.

"That's really good wine," the man said, taking another sip.

He had a final request: "Can we have a group hug?"

The five adults surrounded him, arms out.

With that, the man walked out with a crystal wine glass in hand, filled with Château Malescot. No one was hurt, and nothing was stolen.

The homeowner, Xavier Cervera, 45, had gone out to walk his dog at the end of the party and missed the incident, which happened about midnight June 16. Police classified the case as strange but true and said they had not located a suspect.

"We believe it is a true robbery," said Cmdr. Diane Groomes, who is in charge of patrols in the Capitol Hill area. But it's one of a kind, she said, adding, "I've never heard of a robber joining a party and then walking out to the sunset."

The hug, she said, was especially unusual. "They should have squeezed him and held onto him for us," she said.

Rabdau said he hasn't been able to figure out what happened.

"I was definitely expecting there would be some kind of casualty," Rabdau said this week. "He was very aggressive at first; then it turned into a love fest. I don't know what it was."

Rabdau, a federal government worker who lives in Anne Arundel County, Md., with his family, said that the episode lasted about 10 minutes but seemed like an hour. Rabdau, who lived on Capitol Hill with his wife in the 1980s, said he thinks the guests were spared because they kept a positive attitude during the exchange.

"There was this degree of disbelief and terror at the same time," Rabdau said. "Then it miraculously just changed. His whole emotional tone turned — like, we're one big happy family now. I thought: Was it the wine? Was it the cheese?"

After the intruder left, the guests walked inside the house, locked the door and stared at one another. They didn't say a word. Rabdau dialed 911.

In the alley behind the home, investigators found the intruder's empty crystal wine glass on the ground, unbroken.

Copyright © 2007 The Seattle Times Company