

Standing guard for rich and famous

By Billy Baker, Globe Correspondent, February 25, 2007

Bodyguard.

The term triggers flashbulb images of starlets and rap moguls rolling into nightclubs in New York or LA surrounded by men built like NFL tackles.

But Boston, with its old money and big business, has a thriving bodyguard scene, too.

If you've never noticed it, that's the way they like it.

"We try to be chameleon-like and fit in with our surroundings," says Gerard Boniello, a managing partner of Corporate Resources Group, a local firm that specializes in high-end bodyguard work known as "executive protection."

"We don't like to use the term 'bodyguard,'" Boniello said. "It's an antiquated term and you have a picture of a muscle-bound guy in an ill-fitting suit who is sort of lumbering in the background. We have a term for those types: We call them 'bullet catchers.' They're just there to look intimidating. We're trying to dispel that myth. Our guys blend in."

Boston has more than a half-dozen companies that specialize in executive protection, whose agents operate more like the Secret Service than the paparazzi-shovers who surround celebrities like Britney Spears and Paris Hilton.

For a company to offer executive protection in Massachusetts, it must be licensed as a private investigator by the State Police, according to Boniello. Training requirements for a company's individual agents, who do not need licensing, are at the discretion of the employer, he said.

Executive protection focuses on avoiding conflict, not instigating it, according to Peter Brenker of the American Institute of Executive Protection, a New Jersey-based company that specializes in training agents.

Clients usually fall into two categories -- high-profile and high net worth -- and include children of the ultra-wealthy who attend prestigious universities and private schools in the Boston area. There's also a good business protecting wealthy clients, often from the Middle East, who come to Boston to take advantage of its hospital facilities, the operators say.

Executive protection does not come cheap. Short-term contracts can run up to \$100 an hour for an agent from a high-end firm, according to Boniello, while those who require long-term, 24-hour protection -- which is rare, though not unheard of, in Boston -- usually pay \$50 an hour. For a year, that adds up to \$438,000 for a single person.

Protection that involves an armored vehicle is even more expensive, in the neighborhood of \$1,500 a day.

One of the fastest-growing areas of the business is in CEO protection, according to Ron Greco , director of services for the Bay Colony Investigators, a security firm that operates in the Boston area. Many insurance companies require kidnap and ransom protection for high-level executives. And with growing concern over disgruntled employees, companies are choosing to bolster their own security forces with private details, especially when a company is in the midst of staff cuts, according to Greco.

"When a client is in the process of layoffs, we'll usually sit in a neighboring office and monitor the termination on a radio," Greco said. "Layoffs can get very emotional."

Local agencies also do a thriving business with visiting celebrities and dignitaries, and are often contracted to add their knowledge of the area to the VIP's existing security detail. Greco said that Bay Colony Investigators has worked with dignitaries such as former president George H.W. Bush and Prince Andrew of England, entertainers Jerry Seinfeld and Oprah Winfrey , and star athletes such as Tiger Woods and New York Yankee players.

While executive protection focuses on thwarting physical danger, one of its most important functions is to protect against embarrassment, according to Harold Coyne , president of Coyne Consulting Group, a local company that specializes in high-end clientele and armored vehicle transportation.

Coyne says executive protection is far from the glamorous world of Hollywood muscle. "You don't see many 6-foot-8-inch, 400-pound guys in football jerseys standing around President Bush," he said.

"I've turned down a number of celebrities who want a big guy so they can look good. . . . That's not what we're about. You always hear about these bodyguards in the news, striking photographers and fans. I've been in this business for 23 years, and I can count on one hand the number of times I've had to put my hands on someone in a violent manner."

What surprises most people about this line of work, according to Coyne, is the monotony. "It's not James Bond. It's about being bored and standing outside a door drinking stale coffee. It's about going out the back door.

"I like to say we're butlers with guns. I worked for a year with a young lady who was a local college student. I went to class with her; I bartended the parties in her apartment. Nothing happened. Hardly anybody knew I was there. And that's how it should be. If we do our job right, nobody knows we're around."

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