

Overwhelming sense of satisfaction motives law-enforcement officers

By Brenda McHugh

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"Every time you put on a bullet-proof vest, it changes you," said George Ackerman, a Lantana police officer. "You go home at the end of your shift, thank God that you are safe, and feel good that you have helped to keep a few other innocent people safe in the process."

That is the reason the successful attorney is now patrolling the streets alongside other men-in-blue instead of pursuing a lucrative law practice. It is why the highly educated man teaches criminal justice at Keiser College in West Palm Beach, and also his motivation for pursuing a doctorate in criminology.

"I joke that my career is moving backwards. But the truth of the matter is, there is a crime war on the streets right now. Just read the newspaper. Out there is where I can make the most impact," he said.

If you have ever considered a career as a police officer, or a criminologist, this might be your chance. A security-conscious America has created the need for more criminal-justice professionals than ever before.

The U.S. Department of Labor predicts the hiring trend will continue through 2012. In fact, the need for good officers is so strong, that approximately 60 to 75 percent of all cadets who enter the police-training academies at Palm Beach Community College (PBCC) or Indian River Community College (IRCC) are sponsored by local police departments.

"The majority of students who go through the academy already have a job lined up when they graduate. The department often pays for their training along with their tuition," said Lake Worth Police Officer Constantin Miclea. Requirements for a law-enforcement position differ between government agencies and job responsibilities.

While a few police departments may still consider hiring those with a high school diploma or a GED, most recruiters now prefer that candidates hold an associates or bachelors degree in criminal justice or a related field. Ackerman advised that "a four-year degree is truly necessary to move up once a person is with a department."

To become a law-enforcement officer, one must first pass a physical agility test and a basic abilities test. Both are available at PBCC and IRCC.

Next, either the sponsoring agency or the school will require a credit check, driver's-license history, employment verification, psychological evaluation, polygraph test, and criminal-record and full background investigations. Even then, due to a limited number of seats qualified students need to compete through an assessment process to gain entry into the police academy.

The good news is that nearly all academy graduates, even those who sponsor themselves, accept job offers along with their diplomas.

"There is always a career for someone in this field, whether it is with a local department, with homeland security or in another branch," Miclea said. Salaries for a law-enforcement officer in Palm Beach County range from \$31,500 to \$50,000. State or federal agencies may pay more. All full-time positions include vacation time, and health and retirement benefits.

But, for most officers, the greatest benefit of the job is a sense of personal satisfaction because they are able to help others.

"The ongoing violence out there can be brutal. When we rescue a person, most particularly a child, from an abusive or violent situation, it makes my day worthwhile," Miclea said.

Lantana officer and criminal justice professor Ackerman echoes that sentiment.

He said "I grew up in a rough area of Brooklyn. Even back then, I watched people picking on other people and I wanted to stand up a little bit for all of them. I was always the one helping the young kid who fell off his bike or carrying the elderly lady's groceries.

"Going into law enforcement was a natural progression for me. Anyone entering into the field needs to truly care about other people. That is what this is about.

"And, yes. It is dangerous. It is stressful. Whenever you need to pull your gun, you do so hoping that there is no one aiming back at you.

"Marriages can be destroyed. You may not get much time with your kids. Your loved ones worry."

Every time a news story airs about an officer killed in the line of duty, Ackerman's mother calls to ask if he's ready to find another job.

"I always tell her the same thing," he said. "When I finally do leave this world, I am going to do so with the knowledge that I have made a difference in the lives of others. Being a cop helps me to do that."