

Police Academy for the Rest of Us A 10-Week Course Lets Residents In on What County Officers Do

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One of the most unusual graduation days in Fairfax County last month did not involve caps, gowns or an orchestra playing "Pomp and Circumstance."

Instead, 30 county residents spent a morning taking turns behind the wheel of a police cruiser to complete the county Police Department's Citizens Police Academy at the Emergency Vehicle Operations Center in Chantilly.

Students got two chances to post the fastest time for slaloming through a course of serpentine loops and hairpin turns, and the competition got pretty fierce. In the second trial, students drove with lights and sirens. Every orange cone they knocked over or flattened added extra seconds to their scores.

"Going lights and sirens really gets your adrenaline up," said Lt. Ed O'Carroll, coordinator of the citizens academy, which just completed its seventh session. "The same thing happens to us. This gives you a feel for what we go through."

At an adjacent firing range, the other half of the class was practicing with 9mm Sig Sauer semiautomatic pistols and Remington 870 shotguns, using live ammunition. Their target showed a mean-looking woman holding a gun.

"It takes skills to do this, and I learned that I don't have them," said Lynn Rodriguez, a stay-at-home mother from Lorton.

"We want you to get the true experience of what it's like to have someone's life in your hands," said Donna Spiewak, the academy's recruiter. "You can't take a bullet back."

Afterward, at a picnic of hot dogs and hamburgers, county Police Chief David M. Rohrer handed out diplomas and police maps. When the photos and speeches were finished, the class gave the officers and academy volunteer staff a lengthy standing ovation.

"I learned plenty," said Candice Baines, a full-time novelist from Springfield who said the course gave her a better practical understanding of police work. "I thought the program was great. They brought out so many things I just wasn't aware of."

Rohrer said that's the goal. "The biggest thing we're trying to accomplish is an awareness through education. We're part of the community. We're embedded in it. We want you to get a sense of what we're about. But the officers who participated also are getting a chance to interact with you. That's our biggest constant challenge -- maintaining trust and access to our neighborhoods."

Though the brochure calls the 10-week program "A Glimpse Behind the Badge," it is much more than a cursory look-see at what goes on in the Washington area's largest suburban police department. The three-hour weekly classes, held at various county facilities, consisted of in-depth presentations by supervisors or senior officers from every major division, including narcotics, the 911 call center, internal affairs and the helicopter division. Among the students was this reporter, who signed up after reading about a similar program in another state.

Without exception, the discussions were frank, candid and frequently laced with the special brand of dry cop wit one officer called "morgue humor." No subject was taboo, and every question -- and there were many -- was answered. Classes often ran over the allotted time, and no one seemed to mind.

Anyone 18 or older who lives or works in Fairfax County is eligible to apply for the free program, which is held each spring and fall. Enrollment is limited to 30 people, who must clear background checks.

While not every class was as hands-on as the final session at the firing range and track, there were plenty of opportunities to get an up-close look at such specialized equipment as the SWAT weapons truck and the explosive ordnance division's bomb truck. Charger, one of the department's two bloodhounds (a third currently is being trained), and Luke, a black German shepherd, accompanied the canine department supervisor, Lt. Pat Ronan. Officer Tom Eggars brought Puget, one of two bomb-sniffing Labrador retrievers, along with his portable X-ray machine and 90-pound "bomb suit."

An optional tour of the Adult Detention Center in Fairfax City, which is under the jurisdiction of the Sheriff's Office, was equally thorough, including a face-to-face discussion inside one of the minimum security areas with one of the 1,400 inmates.

Though the weekly presentations were as varied as the settings and the speakers, the common denominator was an often-expressed desire to change what academy program director Fred Sanborn called "the very limited knowledge in the community about what the Police Department does."

"I will talk to your neighborhood watch group, your Scout troop, your church or your civic organization," said Tom Polhemus, a detective with the financial crimes section, who passed out business cards freely after talking about credit card scams, Internet "phishing" schemes and identity theft in the fourth class. "You need to keep an eye on your credit report, and we need to make people aware of what can happen. Call me."

"We have to find more ways to do outreach," Rohrer said. "We're challenged to find ways to take this out into the community."

Lt. Ken May, training supervisor at the Emergency Vehicle Operations Center, told the class, "I was at the [Criminal Justice] Academy when they were starting up this program. I wondered if it was going to work. People don't have that kind of time in this county. Thank you, guys. You made quite a commitment. I applaud you."

Although several class members were already involved in citizens advisory committees or a neighborhood watch program, others spoke of a newfound interest in volunteering or becoming more active with the department.

John Austin, a quality engineer at the American Red Cross and assistant coordinator for a Springfield area neighborhood watch program, said he had initially considered joining a volunteer program in which residents provide administrative support to the Police Department. Since the academy experience, he said, he is contemplating becoming an auxiliary police officer. Such officers receive several months of training and assist with patrols, traffic control, prisoner security, crime prevention and special events.

"What I got out of the course was a much better understanding of how the Police Department operates and the level of effort they put into their job to protect us," Austin said.

Ricky Bell of Chantilly, a Federal Aviation Administration employee who took the course and is African American, said, "I'm disappointed that I didn't see a whole lot of people [in the

department] who looked like me. I want to get involved with the police Citizens Advisory Committee so I can do something about that."

Another participant, the Rev. William C. Teng, pastor of Heritage Presbyterian Church in the Alexandria section of Fairfax, said he hoped to become a police chaplain. "I think now I appreciate what officers go through on a daily basis and the stress element they have making life decisions in a split second. We take so much of what they do for granted," Teng said. "What impressed me the most is how professional they are."

The officers also took the opportunity to tout the pilot programs, training opportunities and cutting-edge technology that set the Fairfax department -- which turns 65 this month -- apart from its peers.

"I'll brag about us a little," said May. "Here in Fairfax County, we're proud of setting a higher standard than the state requires. At the Criminal Justice Academy, it's required that a recruit has three attempts to successfully complete each of the more than 700 state-mandated training objectives or else face dismissal. I believe these standards give us the confidence that by the time they graduate, we've got the best of the best."

Other examples included the SWAT team's involvement in training a number of reserve units headed for Iraq, as well as responding to training requests from numerous local and federal agencies. The police department is the only one in Northern Virginia with a full-time, dedicated marine unit. In conjunction with the trauma center at Inova Fairfax Hospital, the department's helicopter division will be participating in a trial study involving the use of PolyHeme, a blood substitute that is compatible with all blood types.

"Because of the depth of our experience, we've given presentations at training symposiums sponsored by the Virginia Forensic Science Academy and the Virginia Homicide Investigators Association, among others," said Detective Rick Netherton of the crime scene section, who teaches forensics at George Washington University.

Officer training and recertification are ongoing and constant. Tom Eggars of the bomb squad spoke of recently completing hazmat training. The motorcycle division and the SWAT team train regularly at facilities that can be modified to suit multiple scenarios. On the firing range, officers practice both day and night.

Though the class received a blizzard of handouts, maps and "how are we doing" weekly questionnaires, along with a thick binder of resource information, the lasting effect of the program was intangible. Besides revealing a lot about the Police Department, the academy provided an enlightening opportunity to hear firsthand the stories, hopes and frustrations of the people who work there and why they like what they do.

A glimpse behind the badge revealed a big heart.

"There are some really caring people in this department, and that's what I'm so proud of," Rohrer said as the graduation ceremony came to a close. "The bottom line is that I hope you had a chance to meet some of these people. I hope a better understanding exists between my officers and the community."