

Officer

Continued from Page 1A

'This isn't grandma I'm pulling over'

The eight-year veteran has done hundreds, if not thousands of traffic stops, never once feeling like she was in danger.

"I wasn't even afraid on this one," Pratt said. "But you could see all the red flags."

She had just started her graveyard shift, almost a year ago to the date. It was still daylight, and there were no calls for service waiting. She had time for what she calls "play."

She headed toward Pine Street Pub in her district of northeast Salem, where she patrolled solo, and ran the license plate of a silver 2004 Chevy Venture minivan.

It was connected to an area property theft.

Pratt pulled the driver over at around 8:30 p.m. on the 500 block of Highland Avenue NE and was prepared to take some heat.

"This isn't grandma I'm pulling over," she said.

As she began to approach the van, a passenger exited the vehicle, and she requested a second unit. She talked with the driver and passenger for about 45 seconds.

An obvious red flag was the driver never once looked at her. She initially suspected he was going to get out and fight or get out and run. He was a convicted felon and had an active warrant for his arrest for a domestic violence incident.

Then she saw him reach for something under his leg, and her instincts immediately told her to get out of the frame of the window.

"I knew the minute he moved he was going to get a gun and shoot," Pratt said.

The prosecutor in the trial called it an ambush.

Pratt ran toward her patrol vehicle as the driver pulled the trigger four times close range. Bullets struck her left arm, both legs and her back.

She never had time to draw her weapon, but her instincts and training kept her alive — and her ballistic vest.

"For a split second, I felt like a victim," she said. "But then, I've got stuff to do. Nobody else was on scene."

She applied a combat tourniquet on one leg as she radioed information to dispatch about her injuries and the suspect, who sped away in the van.

In the ER trauma room

Pratt reluctantly gave up control of the scene to arriving officers, but never stopped giving instructions, not even in the ambulance on the way to Salem Hospital.

She told someone to take her boots for evidence. She could see where a bullet ricocheted. She asked someone to call Jake because both of her phones were still charging in her patrol car.

"Everyone turned away," Pratt said, realizing no one wanted to break the news to her husband the sergeant. "My only regret is I should have just asked for somebody's phone."

All police officers appoint a notification person, a fellow officer who agrees to inform loved ones if something bad happens. Michelle's is Cpl. Brian Kohlmeier, who was on her squad at the time and is a friend of the couple.

Jake Pratt was at home in the kitchen, packing his lunch for work, when his personal cell phone rang. He didn't answer because he was about to leave and figured if it was important, they'd call his work cell. Seconds later, it rang again.

It was Kohlmeier: "Michelle's been shot, but she's going to be OK ..."

Jake hung up while Kohlmeier was still talking. He rushed next door where a K-9 officer lives. He didn't have a patrol vehicle at home, but he had a spare set of keys to his neighbor's. Jake took him what happened and said he was taking his car, knowing lights and sirens would get him to the hospital much faster.

The neighbor convinced Jake to let him drive, and they were at the hospital barely 5 minutes after Michelle arrived.

Staff recognized Jake as he flew through the emergency room code lock, and they pointed to Trauma Room 6.

"I didn't know what I was walking into," Jake said, obviously scared.

But then he heard Michelle's voice — she was talking to a doctor — and then her laugh.

She saw the look on his face as he walked in, first relief, then frustration that he wasn't there to stop what had happened.

Human side of law enforcement

The Pratts, dubbed "Pratt Squared" by one lieutenant, have been married two years in June. They're not the only married couple on the force.

Supervising a spouse is against department nepotism rules. Jake and Michelle can't work on the same squad because he outranks her.

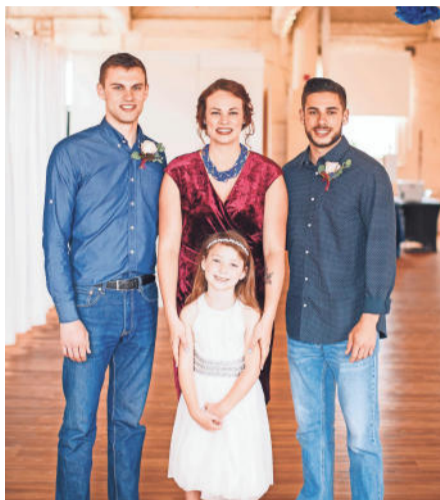
"I'm the boss at home," she said. "He's the boss at work."

They met in the department and



Officer Michelle Pratt was shot four times — in her left arm, both legs, and her back — on May 14, 2019, during a traffic stop. More than a year later, she is continuing to patrol for the Salem Police Department.

MADELEINE COOK/STATESMAN JOURNAL



The children of Jake and Michelle Pratt, both sworn officers with Salem Police Department. Back row, left to right: Peter, Shelby and Paul. Ellie is in the front. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

found they had similar approaches to the job. They treated people with respect and had empathy for people regardless of what they'd done.

They were both runners trying to lose weight — her to fit in a bridesmaid dress, him because she was taking medication for heart palpitations.

They now have a blended family, with four children ranging from age 8 to 27, and a Saint Berdoodle, a mix between a Saint Bernard and a two sheep.

They also have two cows, poodle and some chickens on their three-acre slice of heaven in southeast Salem where they had their home built. Tractors and fences become their world, not patrol cars and jail cells.

"We don't come home and recount our workdays," Michelle said. "It's the kids, cows, chickens ..."

"We do a really good job," Jake added, "of putting it on a shelf."

As they speak about their lives, their jobs, and the impact the shooting had on them, it's a reminder that law enforcement officers are only human.

"One flaw most police officers have is we feel like we have to be too impersonal," Jake said. "We have a gun and badge, but we put our pants on one leg at a time like everybody else."

"We all have the same things going on in our lives — divorces, blended families, child custody," Michelle said.

Telling the children that she'd been shot was stressful and emotional, something she'll never forget.

It took several hours and assistance from the American Red Cross to contact the oldest son, who was in Air Force basic training at the time. And it was a couple of days before they talked to the youngest daughter, who had been with her other parent.

Jake and Michelle picked her up after school and waited until they were home, which she could see was full of flowers. She'd already heard from a friend at school about a police officer getting hurt.

They told her Michelle had been shot and showed her the wounds. The girl was resilient, soon after asking if she could go play outside.

It was a blessing in disguise Michelle didn't have to tell one family member — her dad, who had died two years earlier. He supported her career as a police officer but many times asked if she could pick something that didn't make him worry about her.

"This was his worst nightmare come true," she said. "He slept with a phone by his bed."

Extended family feels the pain, too

When the shooter pulled the trigger, he took aim not just on Michelle and her immediate family, but her law enforcement family.

She had worked with most of the members of her squad for several years, and they were close, getting together for barbecues and socializing outside of work.

She was in Officer Sabrina Hunter's wedding, the one where she had to lose weight for the bridesmaid dress.

"It was not just me and my family affected by this. My squad is recovering, too. They've had a hard time. They feel guilty, like they could have done something."

Michelle Pratt

"It was not just me and my family affected by this," Michelle said. "My squad is recovering, too. They've had a hard time. They feel guilty, like they could have done something."

Most of them were still at the station when they heard "Code 3" over the radio, Pratt's call for officers to use lights and sirens and get there as fast as they can.

It can be used only in certain circumstances, such as when an officer has been shot during a traffic stop, something Salem Police later said hadn't happened in at least 15 years.

Her sergeant, Garon Boyce, was among the first officers on scene.

"I know I've never driven that fast to anything," Boyce said. "To hear a call like that for anyone — and Michelle is one of mine — is a very sinking feeling."

Hunter was in line at a Starbucks drive-thru and reaching for her coffee, which she pushed back at the barista as she sped away. She felt like she couldn't breathe, she was crying and thinking morbid thoughts, all while pushing the Dodge Charger she was driving to the limits. The speedometer was tested. The check engine light came on.

She heard Hunter talking on the radio, but that wasn't comforting enough.

"So many different times in our job, people seem OK when they get shot because they get an adrenaline dump," Hunter said. "And then they die."

Hunter was stopped just before she arrived at the scene and assigned to a perimeter position. The effort to locate the shooter was already underway. She figured it was just as good, because she wouldn't have wanted Pratt to see her such a wreck.

She sat there, in her patrol car, and cried.

"I didn't care who saw me," she said. "I wasn't going to pretend I was tough at the time."

Pratt was lucky. None of the rounds hit an artery or required surgery. She was bruised, bloodied and shaken, but out of the hospital in three hours.

During the briefing the next evening, she FaceTimed the squad, and they passed a phone around. While she began the healing process, her squad kept working.

"We should have been told to go home," said Hunter, now a detective. "None of us slept, we were all on edge, angry, we hadn't eaten, and the next night we were on the job."

"Nobody checked on us."

The Pratts did. A few weeks later, they invited the squad to their place for a barbecue.

"We knew they were struggling," Jake said. "As good as it was for them to see how she was doing, it was very cathartic for everybody."

Hunting for justice for one of their own

While responding officers and emergency personnel tended to Pratt on the scene, the rest of the department shifted focus to catching the shooter.

Officers off duty or on vacation put on their uniforms and volunteered for whatever was needed.

"It got to the point where we ran out of patrol cars," Jake Pratt said.

One officer in the city shop having work done on his patrol car bolted so quickly he was later notified he needed to return some tools the mechanic had left under the hood.

"It's easy to laugh about it now," Jake said from their living room couch, "because she's here, and we've returned to our normal."

Law enforcement agencies from around the Mid-Valley responded, too,

including Keizer and Turner police departments, Oregon State Police, and Marion, Polk and Lincoln county sheriff's deputies. They all knew Salem's resources would be tapped.

More than 100 officers were actively involved in the manhunt.

The SWAT team was called out minutes after the shooting and spent most of the night doing "block search," using thermal imagers, night vision and K-9's from yard to yard in the neighborhood roughly between Pine Street NE and Salem Parkway.

SWAT members were sent home around 3 a.m., but called back a couple hours later after the suspect was tracked to an apartment building.

The Mobile Command Unit parked at nearby Highland Elementary School, which was closed due to the situation, and police swarmed the building.

The Tactical Negotiation Team, coincidentally led by Jake Pratt, worked in conjunction with SWAT. He wasn't involved in the case for obvious reasons, but its members are trained in communications skills to defuse a situation and prevent hostile and/or deadly actions from escalating.

"You don't get stakes a whole lot higher than to talk someone who just shot a police officer," said Jake, who's been with the department since 2006.

The negotiators didn't get involved until after SWAT had already used explosives to blow down the door, rescued and evacuated a neighbor, and completely isolated the suspect in his apartment with no avenue of escape.

Gerrit Roelof, now retired, was the lead negotiator who talked him into surrendering.

"His job was to get on the phone and try to save the life of someone who just tried to kill his boss's wife," Jake said.

Michelle practically held her breath until the incident was over. She didn't want anyone else to get hurt. Jake wouldn't let her listen to the police scanner.

He was on pins and needles, too. He got the call the suspect had been found while at the pharmacy filling a prescription for Michelle.

After less than an hour of negotiations, the shooter was in handcuffs by 8:40 a.m. — 12 hours after the shooting.

"We couldn't have had a better outcome than we did," Jake said, knowing the suspect would ultimately pay for what he did to his wife.

At a banquet in his room, SWAT members presented Michelle a shadow box containing one of the blasting caps from the explosive. The Pratts presented the team with a "Thin Blue Line" American flag in appreciation of its work.

There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

'I didn't die that day for a reason'

A lot has changed since Pratt returned to full duty in December. The flashbacks are gone. She's on day shift now and patrols a different part of town, changes made for family reasons, not the shooting.

Neither she nor her husband ever doubted she would be back in uniform.

"I came back because I want to be in control when I retire from law enforcement and not let anyone else dictate it," Pratt said.

Last November, the company that manufactured the ballistic vest that saved her life flew her and Jake to its Florida headquarters. The Safariland factory was closed for half a day, and employees heard first-hand from Pratt and two other "saves."

Her vest remains in Salem Police evidence in case there's an appeal. The man who shot her was convicted of premeditated, attempted aggravated murder, among other charges, and sentenced to 28 years, 9 months in prison.

Deputy Chief Steve Bellshaw would like to see the vest someday displayed in the new police headquarters building.

Pratt saw it this past week — for the first time since the shooting — when the Statesman Journal requested to see it as the one-year anniversary approached.

The bullet was still lodged in the vest when she took it off that night, but lab technicians carefully removed the .45-caliber full metal jacket round during the investigation.

The vest was wrapped in brown paper with red evidence tape when Sgt. Boyce opened it and placed it on a table. He thumbed through the dissected layers of Kevlar that protected Pratt, pointing out an area noticeably stretched from the round.

Pratt retrieved two special mementos still tucked inside a zippered pocket — the challenge coin she received when she graduated from the academy and a tiny silver St. Michael medal, synonymous with the police profession.

She paused quietly, holding them in her hands, as if each was another important piece to the closure puzzle. Then she zipped them into her new vest.

"I'm not superstitious, but I put things in my vest," she said. "I didn't die that day for a reason."

Capi Lynn is the Statesman Journal's news columnist. Her column taps into the heart of this community — its people, history and issues. She was born and raised in the Mid-Valley and has spent her entire career, 31 years and counting, at this newspaper.