

COFFEE WITH A COP

Police say casual convos enhance work, build trust

BY VICTORIA STEPHENS
THE CHRONICLE

SPRINGFIELD — Springfield police officers met with citizens at two Starbucks on Oct. 21 for informal meetings with the public, giving an opportunity for citizens to ask questions or express concerns they otherwise might not otherwise call in.

Springfield Police Officer Matt Bohman was one of several officers available to converse with residents over a cup of joe. He is a traffic and safety/enforcement officer with 21 years of experience on the force. He is a military veteran from a several-gener-

ation military family, serving in the United States Army from 1992 to 1997 as a military police officer. He said the move to becoming a civilian police officer was a natural progression from those duties, and that there are a lot of things that he enjoys about police work.

"It's not a dead-end job," he said. "You don't go in and push a button for eight hours a day to stamp out widgets."

He said there is such a variety of assignments and an array of things police officers can do, such as K-9, SWAT, becoming a detective, working with the traffic team, as

a patrol officer or on bicycle patrol, and that variety of options makes it an interesting job. He is also a motorcycle enthusiast and enjoys being outdoors.

The worst part of the job, he said, is bringing bad news to families that have lost loved ones. Bohman spent 10 years on the major crash team, where his regular duties including tracking down next of kin after serious injuries and fatalities.

"It is hard on a person being the bearer of bad news," he said.

He said police officers also do death investigations

for people who live by themselves. "It happens more than I would like it to," he said.

Bohman said he has been fortunate to have held multiple assignments. He also worked for 16 years as a drug recognition evaluator, where he would be brought in to assess people who appeared more impaired than a breathalyzer indicated.

He said he has a lot of scary moments, but most disturbing for him was a time when he came close to having to shoot an armed suspect, before they chose to drop their weapon.



Springfield Police Officer Matt Bohman by his motorcycle after the Coffee with a Cop community meet and greet at Starbucks at 1499 Mohawk Boulevard on Oct. 21. VICTORIA STEPHENS/THE CHRONICLE

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a resource that will help with that, or occasionally someone involved in the case will tell him where the other sources are.

One thing he particularly appreciates about the attorneys he works with is that they aren't afraid to go to trial; however, he noted that the court system isn't built on everyone taking their cases to trial, due to the volume of cases.

"The prejudice of the system is to plead them out and get them out of the stack," he said.

The court system is an imperfect one, Lioio said, and it can be easy for people involved to get into ruts and become more jaded over time.

"Working in the court system, you see a steady stream of people not having their best day — a litany of tragedies and grimness. Even though we like to say it doesn't affect us, it does. It grinds slowly away on everyone who works in the system. If you've been doing it for as long as I have, some of that abrasion is getting down to the bone. A lot of times it's not as fun as it used to be."

He added that depending on the circumstances of a case or court experience, it can beg the question: Why keep doing this? Then an interesting and challenging case will come up, and it will suck him back in. By next summer, he wants to stop being a full-time investigator and only focus on those cases that interest him.

"I have a hard time saying no to people I've worked with for years," he said. "I can tell I'm getting overloaded, but then I'm needed and it's hard to turn down."

Lioio can work up to 13 or 14 cases at one time. He added that there was a shortage of investigators in recent years, but now more people are joining the field.

When Lioio first started investigating in the '80s, he compared it to the Wild West. There was no licensing process and if someone wanted to become an investigator, they would just start looking for work. Now, to get a license, a person must meet the requirements, obtain 1,500 hours of experience as an apprentice, submit an application that includes around \$600 in fees and take the exam. After receiving their license, the investigator will need 32 hours of continuing education, according to Private Investigator EDU.

For Lioio, after he left the police force, he bounced around with different jobs. He began working for an "ethically challenged" PI, and found it harder to get paid. After that, he started process serving with someone who rented a room out of his house. Again, he struggled to get paid and when his boss finally skipped town to California, Lioio took over the business. He continued process serving and skip tracing — locating people — and then decided he wanted to take those skill sets and go back to investigating.

With TV shows like "Magnum P.I.," "The Rockford Files" and "Veronica Mars," there are multiple misconceptions the public has about what goes into being a private investigator.

"They believe that we can do magic," he said, "and that's not one of my talents."

He noted that some of the things those fictional investigators have done, particularly in the older shows, are now illegal. For example, investigators can't pretend to be someone else to get information. Lioio said that in the past, he would get a clipboard and stand outside a house he was targeting and ask the residents to fill out a survey; in it, he would bury the questions that he wanted to know the answers to.

"You can't do that anymore," he said. "It's gotten harder to get the information you used to get and I have to tell people, 'I can't do that because it's illegal.'"

Some of the other challenges he faces are Measure 11 cases — which require mandatory minimum sentencing. He said that he has seen clients with "very triable cases" take a plea deal because they don't want to take the risk of going to trial, being convicted and sentenced according to Measure 11 guidelines.

"In many of those cases, I've believed that person wasn't guilty for what they were being accused of but just felt compelled to take the deal," he said.

Lioio said he prefers complex cases where he thinks the person is innocent, but it's going to be difficult and intellectually challenging for him. He said he enjoys getting to dissect the prosecution's case and pull apart what the police did or didn't do. He said the most rewarding cases are when he gets a Not Guilty verdict on someone who wasn't guilty, or when he can sweep away some charges that were "grossly overcharged on the flimsiest of technicalities."

As a defense investigator, that doesn't mean that all of his clients are innocent, but Lioio said that he has a job to do — the same way the prosecution and police have theirs.

"We have a job to do. It is to defend the constitutional rights of any accused, whether they did it or not, and hold the state to its requirement to prove the allegations," he explained. "Some people beat the charges even though they did it, and I don't think that's good, but I don't have a problem that I did my job, and perhaps if the police did their job better than this guy wouldn't have walked."

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