

# Vancouver students meet policemen

by Judy Dela Vega

"Who puts our forest fires? asked the Washington State trooper.

"Smokey the Bear," shouted a kindergartener.

"Well, all troopers wear blue Smokey-the-Bear hats," said the man from the state patrol.

"Who watches 'Adam 12' on television?" he queried again.

"I do, I do, I do," came the five-year-olds' cries.

"Vancouver policemen wear uniforms like the ones on that show," he said. "And the policemen and state troopers are your friends and helpers. Remember that, all right?"

These "friends and helpers" -- the officers of the Vancouver Police Department (PVD) and the troopers of the Washington State Patrol (WSP) -- are represented in the Vancouver Schools by safety education officers Gus Lehto, VPD; Cary Matthews, WSP; and Gary Rasmussen, WSP.

The talk to the young citizens about subjects especially appropriate to their grade levels. Kindergartners hear about the duties of law enforcement officers, first and second-grade children about pedestrian safety, fourth graders about bicycle safety and high school students about the responsibilities and hazards of driving a car.

Trooper Matthews shows a kindergartener the objects in a state patrol car that enable troopers to "help" people:

"This must be an orange ice cream cone, right?" (The youngsters giggle) "No, it's a traffic cone. It shows drivers where they should drive if something is blocking the road.

"Is this dynamite? No, it's a flare. Some of your moms and dads might have these in their cars. Does anyone know what they are used for?"

"Oh, here's my bowling ball and bag. You don't think so. Well look, there's a helmet in here. You've all seen 'Chips' on television, haven't you. Well, in Washington we have 'WHIPS'.

Officer Lehto of the VPD talks with some fourth graders about bicycle safety as well as the dangers of talking to strangers.

"David here is going to show us how to make a right-hand turn signal while riding bikes. That's great, David. Remember, it's not stupid to use these signals while riding your bikes. In fact, it makes a lot of sense. It lets drivers and other people know what you're going to do.

"I also want to mention something I'm sure you've all been warned about by your teacher and parents: Don't go anywhere with a stranger! In my years as a police officer, I've heard about lots of kids your age who are reported missing and never seen again.

**Sixteen or sixty . . .**  
"It doesn't matter if the strangers are teenagers or sixty-year-olds, don't go with them!"

"And it doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman, don't get into the car!"

"If anyone offers you candy or toys -- or asks to take you somewhere fun -- run as fast as you can in the opposite direction. Then, as soon as possible, report what happened to the police. We definitely want to hear about it."

The following quotes are from Trooper Matthews again. This time he's talking to high school students.

**big chance . . .**  
"This is your big chance to ask a cop a question while you're not in the back of his car trying to rationalize away your actions. So, please ask any questions . . ."

"If all the students in this high school were lined up in a row, that's how many people are killed in one year in car accidents in the State of Washington.

"In Clark County, we've had 41 deaths so far this year. Two of those killed were students I talked to in a class like this last year!"

"Traffic accidents are the Number One cause of death of people your age.

**More than half . . .**  
"Alcohol is involved in more than 50 percent of fatal crashes. We're not talking about being drunk, either -- we're just talking about being affected by alcohol.

"Only two percent of the drivers on the road are driving while affected -- yet they're causing more than half the fatal accidents. And the statistics are the worst for your age bracket.

"There are three things I remember -- even when I don't want to -- no matter what else I'm doing, if I pause to think about my job. It's the smell

of blood, booze and gas. It's a distinctive combination: one you don't forget.

"If I took you to Vancouver Memorial or St. Joe's hospitals tonight, I promise you we'd smell those smells on someone being delivered to the emergency room."

An especially warm and personal kind of presentation is given to special education youngsters by the law enforcement officers.

In a recent visit to Harney Elementary, Officer Lehto began his presentation by going from child to child to answer questions or listen to personal stories or concerns. The children -- their faces flushed and alive with pride that policeman ("their friend") was kneeling with his arm around them -- told Lehto about their cat being run over, their mother making them go to bed early and about their Halloween masks.

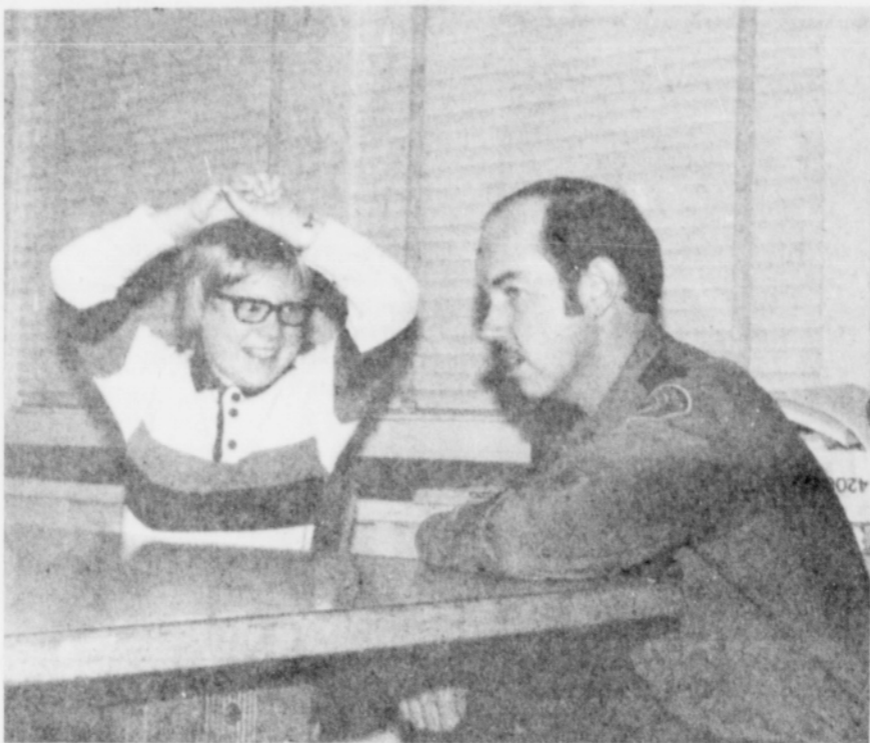
**Safety tips . . .**  
Lehto used every child's statement as a lead-in to a point he wanted to make on safety. The cat that was hit was compared to a child who might also be struck if he or she failed to look both to the right and the left.

"Inside the house is the place to be after dark because people walking or playing cannot be seen by drivers," Lehto told the child who was upset by early bedtimes.

What sort of an impact do these talks have on VSD students?

"The only real feedback we get are the impressions left at the time," commented VSD traffic safety teacher Lowell Neil. "The concentration of the kids and their questions -- which indicate a real interest -- say to me it's a valid experience and that, for at least some, it has a lasting effect.

"Trooper Matthews does a beautiful job relating to the students -- he handles them well. I think the



"Hi" Officer Lehto--pure delight is reflected in the face of this special education child at Harney Elementary as he receives the policeman's undivided attention.

statistics -- particularly the way he presents them in comparison to Vietnam fighters and the number of students in our own high school -- make them startling to these students. I suspect that it makes them feel the way I do when I see a horrible car accident."

Elementary teacher Connie Wyatt had this to say: "Beyond the actual discussion of rules and regulations --

which obviously helps -- the most important benefit is that these youngsters have a chance to meet

a policeman and see that he really is their friend.

"Through listening and talking to Officer Lehto, they began to see that policemen really do care -- that they really help people. The impression they form from the presentation is that policemen are 'good guys'.

"Hopefully, that impression will stay with them for a long time."

Ms. Vega is editor of the VSD newsletter "The Bridge."

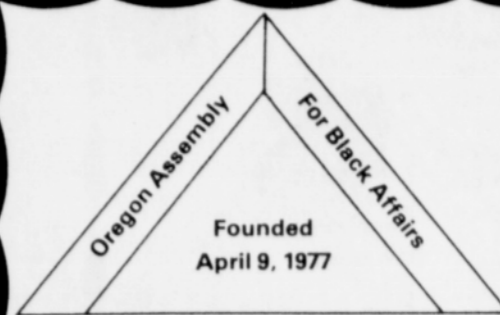


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