

Typing Law and Order

I was a typist at the local police department. I transcribed stories of child abuse, assault, burglary, rape, shoplifting and homicide while glimpsing the nitty-gritty of law enforcement. Drunks were marched into the fingerprint room, smelling of old alcohol, all mouthy and scared. Holding cells confined citizens who screamed and kicked the door; or, they could be quietly crying, handcuffed and wondering what was next. Stone-faced parents came to retrieve their delinquent kids. Officers rushed out of the building to crimes in progress, lights and sirens blaring. It could be a whirlwind. Working on Christmas day, I noted that the number of calls went dramatically down. Why can't people behave the other 364 days?

Officers seldom share in the highlights of people's lives given that they frequently see people at their worst. They confront the underbelly of human society and see death. Not the kind of death seen all dressed-up at a funeral parlor, but naked death. A shift of policing can be an adrenaline rush or, just as often, monotonous. Officers still arrive ready to serve, every day. They sit in shift meeting getting crime updates, joking with each other, readying themselves for a day or night of unknowns. Once in a while, they also get to be a hero by locating that runaway, retrieving stolen property, or listening to the woes of the lonely. They learn to de-escalate the most trying and dangerous situations: domestic quarrels, bar brawls, and fights over nothing at all. They cope with the mentally ill when the rest of society can't be bothered. They connect with the homeless and the helpless. Some use their guns, others never do. The gracious service they provide does not always offset the despair they witness. They pay a hefty price in divorce, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, even suicide.

Recent headlines have cast a shadow over all of law enforcement. Their eyes tell the story of an overworked, underappreciated group, who are admittedly imperfect. Mistakes by fellow officers have cost people their lives. Some resort to criminal activity themselves. Police officers should be held accountable; even they are not above the law. I believe the decent ones, who don't make headlines, are dedicated to the communities they serve. A career in law enforcement has evolved into an unpopular pursuit. Police officers ensure the general public never knows how awful people can be. Thank them. They deserve it.