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Wearing Blue

By Brooke Vail

“Out on the streets, you have your badge and uniform to protect you. Walking into a crack house, you feel naked,” Investigator Jennifer Gobel explained, describing her experience working undercover in South Bend Police Department’s Narcotics Division. Gobel revealed the intense details of a specific drug bust she took part in during her two years in the Narcotics Division. The SBPD was working to take down a long-time drug dealer, “O,” and in the attempt to do so, set up several undercover deals with Officer Gobel. After having met with “O” several times before, she set out to make one final deal with him inside his home. Upon her arrival, “O” became unusually suspicious and asked Officer Gobel if she was wired. She explained to me that the Department has other ways of monitoring undercover operations without a wire but she was, however, carrying a gun. “O” was growing impatient and was ready to search her for a wire, using any means necessary. “You have to be able to think on your feet and talk yourself out of situations,” Gobel said. She decided to tell “O” that she was not wired, but she was carrying a gun. She told “O” that she carries it everywhere just to be sure she can protect herself. “O” was furious that she would bring a gun into his house, “where his kids sleep,” and disrespect him. She explained the fear that overcame her as the 6’6”, 175 pound drug dealer towered over her raging with anger knowing he could pull his own gun on her any second. Fortunately, “O” cooled down, finished the deal, and Officer Gobel walked out of the home unscathed. Of her nine years in law enforcement, this experience was her scariest (Gobel 3 March 2011).

Nine years ago, Jennifer Gobel was going to school for interior design when she took a position working the night shift as a dispatcher for the South Bend Police Department. After several months, the Department began hiring new patrol officers and her boss suggested she apply. “I sort of just fell into it,” Gobel said, chuckling. “I wanted to pursue interior design, but I always thought being a cop would be cool.” After submitting an application, she was hired and sent to the Indiana State Law Enforcement Academy in Plainfield, Indiana, to undergo training.

Education and training is particularly important in the careers of law enforcement personnel. State and local law enforcement agencies typically require applicants to have received a high school diploma and often encourage formal training or education post high school, though it is not required. Many agencies will pay all or part of the tuition of officers working toward degrees in criminal justice, police science, administration of justice, or public administration, and usually pay higher salaries to those who earn degrees in such fields. After hiring, officers must

undergo a 12 to 15 week period of training at a state or regional police academy (Police and Detectives).

At the police academy, officers go through training in a classroom setting as well as physical training outside of the classroom. The classroom setting is very structured and is run much like a college course. Within the classroom there is instruction in constitutional law and civil rights, state and local laws and ordinances, accident investigation, court procedures, precedents, government regulations, agency rules, and the particular police strategies, policies, and procedures employed by their particular agency (Police and Detectives; “Occupational Profile”).

Outside of the classroom, officers receive training in the proper use of firearms and defense tactics, as well as participating in the Emergency Vehicle Operation Course (EVOC) during which they are taught how to drive while under stress. Before completing their academy training, officers must complete the Physical Ability Test (PAT). In the state of Indiana, the PAT requirements include a vertical jump of 13.5 inches and the completion of 24 sit-ups in one minute and 21 push-ups in a row. In addition, officers must be able to run 300 meters in 82 seconds, and one and a half miles in 18 minutes and 56 seconds (Gobel 3 March 2011).

Officer Gobel attended the Indiana Law Enforcement Academy in Plainfield, Indiana, for 13 weeks prior taking her first assignment as a police officer. “It was run like the military. You would get up in the morning and get into formations. They’d inspect your rooms to make sure they were clean and your beds were made properly. If they found even a single hair in the sink, watch out (Gobel 3 March 2011).” Officer Gobel explained the physical training, including the PAT. When asked if the requirements are the same for both men and women she responded that they are, and she believes they should be stating, “the dangerous parts of the job don’t care who you are.”

There are nearly 800,000 sworn police officers in state and local law enforcement agencies in addition to approximately 88,000 in federal agencies. Officers at all levels are responsible for carrying out the law, maintaining order, preventing crime, and providing services to the community, though each level of law enforcement has different responsibilities regarding certain types of crime and where they have jurisdiction (Cole, Smith 106).

Federal law enforcement agencies are part of the executive branch of the national government because they investigate specific crimes determined by Congress, including drug trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism (Cole, Smith 106). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is the federal government’s main and most general law enforcement agency. The FBI’s main goal is to combat terrorism, but it also fights public corruption, major white collar crime, cyber crime, national and international criminal organizations, and espionage. It also protects civil rights and supports other federal, state, county, municipal, and international law enforcement agencies. The FBI is not the only federal law enforcement agency, however;

there are several agencies that enforce specific laws. For example, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) investigates the importation and sale of “controlled drugs;” the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) handles alcohol, tobacco, gun control, and bombings; the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tracks violations of tax laws. Federal agencies are solely in charge of federal crimes, with some exceptions, most notably crimes that cross state lines, some kidnapping cases, and drug trafficking (Cole, Smith 107).

Each state, except Hawaii, has a full-service police agency. These agencies patrol state highways, provide full law enforcement services for rural areas, and in many states are given general police powers. Generally, state police officers operate solely in areas where no other police protection exists or when local officers ask for their assistance. 80 percent of sworn officers are employed at the local, or municipal, level. Local police officers have general law enforcement authority over their city or town (Cole, Smith 108). This general authority includes maintaining regular patrols and responding to calls for service. Much of an officer’s time is spent responding to calls and doing paperwork. Uniformed officers fill many roles at the local level acting as official escorts, such as when leading funeral processions, and directing traffic flow in case of emergencies. These officers identify, pursue, and arrest suspects of criminal activities, investigate traffic accidents and other accidents to determine causes and to determine if a crime has been committed, and issue tickets or warnings to violators of traffic laws. Officers also monitor, report, and investigate suspicious people and situations, safety hazards, and unusual or illegal activity in a particular area, as well as processing prisoners, and preparing and maintaining records of prisoner bookings among many other duties (Police and Detectives; “Occupational Profile”).

In an unstable economy, job security is a growing concern for many careers. When posed with the issue of job security at the South Bend Police Department, Officer Gobel explained that authorities in the city have threatened to cut jobs due to budget restraints; however, the department has continued hiring new officers. Gobel explained that during a recession is the worst time to cut jobs in law enforcement because it is a time when crime rates soar due to unemployment and panic. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of police and detectives is expected to grow 10 percent over the 2008–18 decade, and opportunities within local agencies will be more favorable than those in state or federal agencies (Police and Detectives).

The average salary for police officers greatly varies amongst different departments and agencies as well as amongst the different ranks. In May 2008, police and sheriff's patrol officers had average annual wages of \$51,410. The lowest 10 percent in the country earned less than \$30,070, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$79,680. Median annual wages were \$46,620 in Federal Government, \$57,270 in State government, \$51,020 in local government. In the same year, the average annual wages of detectives and criminal investigators were \$60,910 (US Dept. of Labor).

At the South Bend Police Department, the starting salary for a patrol officer is \$41,500 and increases to \$43,496 within the first three years ("Careers @ SBPD : Can YOU answer the call?"). According to Officer Gobel, the SBPD's salary is one of the lowest in the State of Indiana. In addition to a yearly salary, officers receive bonuses if they work the afternoon and midnight shifts. Their uniforms and equipment are provided by the department and most officers take part in the "Take Home Car program," in which they are able to take their patrol car home with them when they are off-duty. Officers receive health and life insurance through SBPD, paid vacations and sick leave, holiday pay, a pension, and are offered retirement at 52 years of age if they have at least 20 years of service. Officers also earn a yearly raise in salary. Officers employed by SBPD have a number of opportunities to advance within the department. After experience as a patrol officer, employees can earn positions with the Bomb Squad, Civil Unrest Team (CUT), SWAT, Narcotics (SOS), and many others ("Careers @ SBPD : Can YOU answer the call?").

In her nine years on the force, Officer Gobel has worked as a night patrol officer, in SOS, the narcotics division, as an undercover agent, and is now with the Special Victims Unit, working as an investigator. Of these different positions, Officer Gobel most enjoyed being in uniform as a patrol officer. She enjoys being an investigator with SVU because it is more family-friendly. Investigators work from eight to four Monday through Fridays and are off on holidays; such is not the case with patrol officers. Gobel shared that being an investigator is extremely "mental"; after a while, you can almost predict what each case will bring. "Many rapists and child molestation cases are very similar. It's like the same game, just a different version." Her love of car and foot chases, acting upon gut-instincts, and never knowing what each day will bring are the sources of her love for the uniform.

"I'm kind of an adrenaline junkie... I loved the thrill of not knowing what to expect each day," Officer Gobel explained. She recalled a day during which she discovered a sixteen year-old kidnap victim purely by accident. While heading to a call she had received from the dispatcher, Officer Gobel noticed a car in front of her quickly turn down a nearby alleyway. She found this suspicious, and acting on a gut-instinct, decided to call for back-up and ask another officer to attend to her previous call. As she entered the alley she found the driver had abandoned the car and fled the scene. She peered in the backseat window of the car to see a car jack, spare tire, and other items that are typically kept in the trunk. Once back-up arrived, Officer Gobel opened the trunk of the car to find a sixteen year-old boy, bound, with a bag over his head. As they released the bag and bindings, the young boy gasped for air. Had Officer Gobel not pursued her gut-instinct, the boy would not have lasted but another hour in the trunk before perishing. Situations like this one are what Officer Gobel loved about wearing the uniform (Gobel 3 March 2011).

While Officer Gobel thrives on the exciting and unexpected aspects of the job, she noted that there is a great deal of stress and pressure involved in being a police officer, and that officers often rely on each other to get through the day (Gobel 3 March 2011). In *Criminal Justice in*

America, George F. Cole and Christopher E. Smith explain that there is a subculture within the policing community. Within this subculture, police share values developed from their career that affect their views, behavior, and their perception of their role in society. Cole and Smith address four main issues associated with the police subculture: the “working personality,” the role played by individual morality, the isolation of officers, and the stress involved with police work (115).

The concept of the “working personality” of officers is created because of the threat of danger they face on a daily basis and their need to establish and maintain authority. The “working personality” affects the daily work of police officers and can affect how they follow departmental rules and procedures when faced with dangerous situations and the need to exert authority. The police are constantly faced with ethical and moral dilemmas in nearly every facet of their jobs. The morality of officers often faces scrutiny from the public when they handle situations in ways that do not strictly adhere to procedures. Dealing with personal ethical dilemmas and the scrutiny of others is often difficult for police officers (Cole, Smith 116).

Cole and Smith explain that police isolation occurs because the police often hold the perception that no one except other officers understands the demands of the job and the public is hostile towards them. With police isolation, officers isolate themselves from others and only associated with other officers both on and off duty. The final issue encountered with the police subculture is job stress. Police officers experience extreme stress from daily facing real threats and dangers, working irregular hours, adhering to detailed rules and procedures, and dealing with crime and criminals.

Officer Gobel discussed her experience with police subculture while working with the South Bend Police Department. “Most of my friends are cops... We all have this sort of weird outlook and sense of humor that the general public doesn’t get. We kind of use our sense of humor as a type of defense mechanism in order to deal with things (Gobel 3 March 2011).” Gobel explained that in many cases, cops tend to marry other cops or they marry nurses because other officers and nurses are the only ones who understand what the job brings and what they have to deal with. Officer Gobel married a fellow police officer in 2008. She described her love for horror films growing up, but since entering the police force she cannot watch them anymore. “After seeing those things in real life, it’s hard to watch them in a movie.” When it comes to dealing job stress, Officer Gobel likes to work out. She explained that she tries to leave work at work; when she has a tough day, she takes her stress and emotion to the gym to release it.

Women have been a part of the police force since 1905; however, the number of women officers remained small for much of the twentieth century because policing was considered “men’s work.” The number of female officers rose from 1.5 percent to 11 percent between 1970 and 2003. Today, the national average of female sworn officers is around 12 percent. While the number of females in law enforcement has continued to rise, most females are still near the bottom of the police hierarchy. In larger agencies, women hold less than ten percent of

supervisory positions and only seven percent of positions at the rank of captain or higher. Female officers face the challenge of others doubting their qualifications and ability solely based on gender (Cole, Smith 113). In spite of male officers questioning whether women are qualified police officers, studies done by the Police Foundation, as well as others, have found that generally, male and female officers perform in similar ways. Some researchers even believe that women do a better job of avoiding excessive use of force and are more effective in interviewing crime victims, especially those involving rape, domestic violence, and child molestation (114).

Officer Gobel has had some issues with other officers regarding her role on the force, but she has never felt incapable of performing as well or even better as her male colleagues. She explained that both within the department and in the public, men receive a level of respect that she often does not. While Gobel feels that female officers should be respected, she doesn't believe they should be hired simply to fill a quota. "There are some women on the force that simply shouldn't be. If I was in a tough situation, I wouldn't count on them to have my back...but there are also guys on the force that I feel the same about."

Toward the end of our meeting together, Officer Gobel shared some of the darker aspects of the job that you would not find in simply reading a pamphlet or textbook about police work. Gobel revealed that you would not see pictures of broken households and the scenes of domestic calls, and you would not be able to smell the attacker on the brutally assaulted rape victim. She spoke of the difficulty of working with abused and molested children and warped molesters. Officer Gobel explained that no textbook could describe what it is like to give a death notice to an unsuspecting family member.

Officer Jennifer Gobel offered incredible insight into the life of a police officer. Even considering all of the responsibilities and burdens that the job bears, Officer Gobel stated that if given the chance to do it all over again, she would not change a single thing; she could not imagine being anything other than a cop. Gobel explained that the longer you do the job, your views and opinions change about the world around you. She said, "After having experience on the police force, I don't have many new expectations for my job... I just want to help people."

Prior to conducting my interview with Officer Gobel and studying police work, I knew very little about what being a police officer actually entails. I assumed that most cops just pull drivers over to meet a quota and respond to calls to break up drunken bar fights. Having conducted research, I have found that police work is difficult, time-consuming work that is crucial to the criminal justice system in our country and community. My interview with Officer Gobel showed me that it takes a special type of person to be a police officer; a police officer must have great knowledge of the law, strong ethics, indestructible courage, and a passion for helping others. I have learned that being a cop is not just a job, it is a lifestyle.

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