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Behind the Badge

By Nicole Maenza

The night was almost over. Ray Lopez and his field training officer (FTO) had just pulled into the police station's parking garage. "Just as I was about to park, a half-dressed woman came running toward us, screaming her head off. Clearly, she had been a victim to a crime," Lopez described as he recalled his last night in training. His FTO got out of the car to try and calm the woman down, but she did not stop screaming until a red Cadillac busted through the back gate. The tires came to a screeching halt and the smell of burnt rubber filled the garage. As soon as the man in the car saw that there were police present, he put it in reverse and fled the scene. "I knew that this was the guy who had harmed this woman the second he burst through the parking garage," Lopez went on with the story, "Being an officer in training, I was not allowed to do anything without my FTO present or without consent from him, but my instincts just took over. Before I knew it, I was out on the streets going after him," and the chase was on. His engine grew louder and louder and suddenly, he was going 80mph and saw nothing else except the red Cadillac in front of him. The man eventually crashed into a telephone poll and Lopez handcuffed him. When his FTO had arrived

on scene, Lopez thought he was going to be in trouble, but his FTO was happy with his instincts even though he was not supposed to pursue any course of action. "I'll never forget my first car chase," Lopez said with a huge smile on his face, "As scary as it was, it gave me quite a rush. But hey, it's all part of the job."

Ray Lopez has been with the Aurora Police Department in Illinois for 18 years. He knew he wanted to be a police officer since he was six years old when he witnessed a fire engine, an ambulance, and a police car race down the road to get to a fire that broke out a few blocks away. "I remember thinking 'Why are the police going to a fire? They don't even know how to fight fires,'" he explained, "I thought it was the coolest thing that they would go out of their way to help others and I knew that helping others was what I wanted to do. I felt I could do that through law enforcement." Lopez also thought his personality was best suited for this kind of job. He has always been a hard worker, so working under pressure and dangerous situations are perfect attributes that police officers should have in order to be fit for this kind of job and help those in need. Because officers deal with danger on a daily basis, they must establish authority. These two factors, danger and authority, make up what is known as "The Working Personality," and also influences the way police officers think and perceive their occupational environment (Cole, Smith 115).

Being an officer is both physically and mentally demanding, but with the proper education and training, it becomes easier to handle. Every officer must go through police academy training. The training varies from two-week sessions to four-month long programs as well as field training (Cole, Smith 114). The physical demands depend on the police department that the officers are attending. The physical standards are different for males and females as well as age groups in the state of Illinois. For males ages 20-29, the requirements for the physical fitness test consist of 16 inches on the sit-and-reach and 37 sit-ups in one minute. They must also be able to bench press .98, which is scored as the amount of weight pushed divided by the body weight. In addition to these requirements, males must be able to run 1.5 miles in 13 minutes and 46 seconds. For females of the same age group, they are required to score 18.8 on the sit-and-reach, reach 31 sit-ups in one minute, bench press .58, and run 1.5 miles in 16 minutes and 21 seconds (Jurkanin, 6).

Along with physical fitness, education is critically important in law enforcement. Ray Lopez attended Northern Illinois University. Although most state and local police departments only require a high school diploma or GED, education beyond that is very beneficial. Some departments even require at least an additional two years of higher education. At the federal level, agencies such as the FBI and the DEA want people who have at least a four-year degree (Cole, Smith 110).

Furthermore, degrees in criminal justice, police science, public administration, administration of justice, or law enforcement are the most beneficial degrees to police officers as well as anyone in the area of law enforcement (Tellefsen). Lopez believes “It is important to have a good understanding of the law as well as some background knowledge in crime.”

According to Joycelyn M. Pollock, the two missions of police officers include fighting crime and serving the public. The “crime fighter” aspect of policing presumes that criminals are the enemy and officers can use any means necessary to catch and punish them. The other is one that views police officers as serving the public, meaning they serve all people, including criminal and pursue the public good (Pollock 102-103). Police officers have to be good in both of the missions in order to be successful in this line of work. They have to recognize criminals as human beings, yet must be able to handle each encounter with criminals with precaution. Cops must also act as public servants and help those in need.

Police officers tend to have somewhat long work hours, but they make good money. As of 2009, the starting salary for police officers working for the Aurora Police Department is around \$50,000. After their first year, they make an average of \$67,000 a year. Once an officer reaches 5-10 years of service, they make over \$80,000 annually. Of

course, most salaries tend to be negotiated based off of performance and good work ethics (aurora-il.org).

Police officers play an important role in society. They often develop close relationships with the public to help solve social problems and improve the community rather than simply enforcing the law, which is known as “community policing” (Pollock 106). Ray Lopez demonstrates the effects community policing has by actively getting involved in Aurora’s community. He is involved in the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program, also referred to as D.A.R.E., which teaches kids the necessary skills to avoid things like drugs, gangs, and violence. He also travels to high schools and colleges in Illinois and gives lectures on these topics to better the young people in society. As well as reaching out to kids and teens, Lopez is on a variety of special teams through the Aurora Police Department such as the Crisis Intervention Team, which deals with the mentally handicapped as well as a member of the Special Response Team (SRT), where he tries to talk or negotiate with people who are armed and/or dangerous.

Although police officers do so much good for the communities in which they serve, sometimes they abuse their power. Some people argue that cops have too much power, which leads to transgression on their behalf. “Too much authority? Absolutely not,” Lopez explains. “We are restricted by the laws and the constitution, which is for the benefit of the

citizens. School personnel have more authority to search a student's locker based off of suspicious reasoning than a cop would. I would have to have evidence and get a subpoena to do something like that." In his 18 years of service, Lopez has rarely seen his fellow officers abuse their power, and when they do, the Aurora Police Department has severe consequences for their actions. Unfortunately, not all departments are this lucky to rarely see this go on in their communities. Being such an influence on society and having that much authority can cause corruption or misconduct on occasion. For example, some police officers use their position for financial benefit and may accept bribes, or an officer may actively commit crimes to get ahead in their career (Pollock 212).

One of the major issues that Police Officers have faced in the past is racial profiling, and it remains to be a problem today. The reason why it is such a big problem is because people do not fully comprehend what racial profiling is. Racial profiling occurs when police officers use race or ethnicity as reasonable suspicion to stop a driver and search their vehicle (Pollock 138). Racial profiling came about when people started smuggling drugs across the borders. Because minorities were the culprits of this ongoing drug battle, border patrol officers and custom agents in airports targeted them in the search for drugs. Eventually, highway patrol officers did their part in the search by stopping cars in attempt to put an end to the distribution (Pollock 138). "Being a Hispanic

officer, I am always consciously aware that racial profiling is a problem, and in my opinion, it always will be a problem until people take the time to learn what racial profiling actually is,” Lopez explained as he addressed his concerns on this hot topic.

On a more positive note, important issues such as racial profiling have not affected the rates of crime in any way. Despite what most people believe, the crime rates in America have gone down in the last two decades. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the total amount of crime in 2001 was 24,215,700 criminal victimizations. In 2009, the number dropped to 20,057,180. In the year of 2010, the criminal victimization rate fell even more to 18,725,710 (Truman 2). Because of what is shown on television and in the media, most people are given a false impression and do not realize that the rates, in fact, are decreasing. But with the decline in the economy, what could possibly be the reason for these numbers to plummet? Could it be that there really is less crime occurring, or are police officers just doing a better job at enforcing the law? Lopez states that there is no major variable to the decrease in crime rates, but a slew of important factors in communities. “It would be arrogant to say that crime rates are lower because of law enforcement,” Lopez explains, “Yes, we play a major role in society and our officers are better trained to deal with crime and combat, but education, community projects, money management, and better parenting are the real reasons

behind it.” Unfortunately, crime has existed for as long as humans have. Even though crime rates have gone down, crime will always exist.

One of the biggest challenges police officers face is not letting their morals conflict with doing their job. Cops face moral and ethical dilemmas on a daily basis. Their job is based off of ethical values, which, more often than not, define what believes to be morally good. Ethical formalism is an ethical system that focuses on duty and the belief that the only thing truly good is good will (Pollock 26). The law makes it clear about what an officer’s job entails, regardless of any bias or morals. Lopez explains, “At some point in their career, all officers will find themselves in a situation where their morals conflict with doing their duty. Whenever I am in a position where I feel that my morals might prevent me from doing my job, I remove myself from that situation and let other officers handle it.”

Facing moral and ethical dilemmas is not the only thing Ray Lopez goes through on a daily basis. Every day before work, he performs what he calls a “pre-shift check-up,” where he goes over all of his equipment, including his vest/uniform equipment, squad car gear, and computer equipment. The Chief of Police then gathers everyone up to brief them on announcements and update them about anything new going on in the community. Once the 20 minute in-service is over, the officers begin their duties for the day. Other than his pre-shift check-up and the in-

service, everything else about each day is different. Lopez believes there is never a typical work day. "In policing, you see things out on the job all the time that you wish you could just get out of your head," he said. Eighteen years later, he still remembers his first day as a full-fledged officer. He was working the night shift. Twenty minutes into his shift, he received a call about shots fired and someone had been hit. When Lopez arrived on scene, the shooter(s) had already left, and he found the 16 year old boy who had taken a shot to the chest. Lopez remembered, "I rode with him in the ambulance. The EMT's were performing surgery on him to try and stop him from bleeding out. My job was to stay with the kid and try to get more information on the shooter(s). He seemed in good spirits, despite what was happening, and was responsive to my questions. What I didn't know was that I would be the last person he ever talked to." According to Ray Lopez, this kind of job requires the proper mindset. In order to deal with such occurrences, one must be mentally tough as well as physically strong.

As well as the day to day tasks that police officers encounter, cops also undergo a lot of stress. There is no avoiding it because it comes along with the job, but there are ways one can deal with it. One way Lopez handles stress is by using humor. "Every day I tell myself a joke before I start my job, or I'll ask one of my buddies to tell me one. It helps me feel a little more relaxed and at ease." Lopez likes to get involved in activities outside of policing too, such as coaching badminton. It gives

him a chance to hang out and get to know other people and see the good in them. He also avoids watching cop shows. "Why watch it when I live it?" he says. Spending time with his wife and son helps him forget about the things that go on at work. He feels quality time with them is very important. Unfortunately, not all cops are as lucky as Lopez. They do not have a means for relieving their stress and it becomes so much to bear that they begin to lose their families or their peace of mind. According to C.P.M. Joe Pangaro, policemen often forget that they are not personally involved in what they come across on the job. The pain and suffering that they witness others go through is not their own pain and suffering, so they should not take it home and let it affect their own lives (Pangaro).

As one can see, being a police officer has its up's and down's. I had the opportunity to talk with Ray Lopez about the different sides to the job. He says that police officers deal with more bad than good. Most calls they get regard some sort of criminal behavior, domestic dispute, or accident. Because cops are always in the public eye, they are constantly watched and scrutinized for their actions, which cause people in society to view them as nothing more than a uniform. This puts pressure on the departments because any little thing their officers do could be taken the wrong way and the trust between the department and the community would weaken.

For Lopez, there are many aspects of the job that he finds most rewarding. Whether it's a call about someone's car breaking down or bettering the community by catching the bad guys, he really enjoys helping people. His job requires a lot of hard work, but he finds that in the end, it's worth the hassle. He loves going home each night knowing full-well he did his job, and that he did it to the best of his ability. He feels he gives his job the honor and the respect his badge deserves, which is something he wishes he could say for all cops. "What I am most proud of," says Lopez, "is how kids look up to me and think of me as a hero. My son loves that I'm a cop and he always brags about it to his friends."

Before the interview ended, Ray Lopez gave me some insight on what anyone considering law enforcement should know. "Being an officer is more than what you see on COPS. It is more than being physically fit, but having qualities of value." He continued to tell me that the best and most successful police officers are the ones that have the right character and the right mindset for the job. People in this career must be strong-willed as well as have strong morals. Education plays an important role in the upbringing of new officers because the better one's education, the better trained and prepared that officer will be.

Having the privilege to speak with Ray Lopez about his career as a police officer was really an eye-opening experience. Before this interview,

I had a good grasp on what policemen and women do, but I always thought it was similar to what one would see on television or read in a newspaper. Now I know that television glorifies police work more than it should and hardly focuses on what it actually takes to be a police officer as well as how to become a successful one. I realized that being an officer is not just about providing a service and doing a job, but it is also a way of life. Being a cadet in the ROTC program, I noticed the similarities between the people that are police officers and people involved in the military. These men and women fight for what is right and fight to protect their people. They must be physically tough and have good, strong character, and I fully respect what they do.

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