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Writing 152A

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Feature: Behind the Badge- Rebuilding Trust and Public Perception

Into the Fire: A Deputy's Defining Moment

As Santa Barbara Sheriff's Deputy Kenny Rushing stepped into his police cruiser on a frigid winter evening in 2010, he received an urgent call, detailing a police chase that resulted in a head-on collision. Both hands gripping his wheel, Rushing's eyes gleamed with determination, fixated on the road ahead. The flashing lights of his police cruiser prompted an immediate shift in demeanor, readying himself for the tense scene ahead.

"There was nothing but fire and screams when I got out of my vehicle. I knew the flames were too hot, but I couldn't sit around and do nothing," said Deputy Rushing.

Rushing sprang into action, grabbing his fire extinguisher to keep the flames from consuming the mangled wreckage of twisted steel and the people trapped within. The flames began to grow, leaving the metal in a state that consumed all his attempts to cool it. This left Rushing with no choice but to look for survivors outside the vehicle and wait for backup. "I had to do something

to help, I couldn't just leave them there," said Rushing, his voice tinged with a feeling of helplessness, still today, 15 years later. Four people were killed in the blaze, as all efforts to stop were futile.

Deputy Rushing's harrowing experience is just one example of the many critical incidents an officer faces throughout their career. According to a study published in the FBI's [Law Enforcement Bulletin](#) in 2023, police officers face around 178 critical incidents — those causing severe threat or distress — throughout their career, while the average person faces around two or three. While Rushing's experience underscores the dangers of police work, the officers today have seen a shift in the public eye, facing even more pressure in response to growing scrutiny and the evolving public expectations of their conduct.

Policing in a Changing Landscape

Newly initiated Officer Zeke Alleman faces a landscape different than what Rushing faced when he started, an environment altered by the recent scrutiny of civilian cell-phone videos and a society still shocked by George Floyd which was due to grave police misconduct. Although he is new to the force, Alleman exudes calm and confidence as he steps into his cruiser.

On a recent Thursday afternoon shift, Alleman is driving through the streets of Santa Barbara in search of suspicious activity. This is a normalcy for officers, as they hope to convey a sense of security to the public, not to elicit fear. "With every stop comes a fine balance of enforcing the law and ensuring a sense of safety," said Alleman.

As Alleman spotted a suspicious vehicle with no license plate, he made the calm decision to perform a traffic stop. The police cruiser's lights flashed with authority, signaling for the car to pull to the side of the road. The SUV complied, halting to a stop on the shoulder of Hollister Ave. Alleman approached the car with an air of tension building around him. The window squeaked open, allowing Alleman to look inside in search of any illicit substances.

“How’s your evening going ma’am,” asked Alleman. “Any hand grenades or bazookas in the vehicle?” This immediately quieted the driver’s nerves, allowing for a calm interaction. De-escalation from the beginning is key in traffic stops, as there is a “Time and a place to be firm, but being an inhumane robot makes these situations much more difficult,” said Alleman, noting a fine line between enforcing the law and creating a safe environment for citizens.

Balancing Authority & Community Trust

Police officers are taught to strive to protect their communities by enforcing the law with authority while maintaining public trust. [The Stanford Open Policing Project](#), an initiative of the Stanford University journalism computational lab, began to collect national police statistics in 2015, finding that a police officer makes approximately 50,000 traffic stops a year. Among this 50,000 they issue a ticket around 40 percent of the time, resulting in an abundance of stressful situations. In these moments a calm demeanor is needed to uphold authority and stay in control of the situation.

For many, the stress of police work can be very straining and finding a balance is key to keeping a level-headed mindset within intense situations. Deputy Rushing was in his first year as a law enforcement officer when he was left helpless to witness a traumatic traffic collision. “The only way to cope was through constant family support and knowing I would be able to help more people in the future,” said Rushing, still haunted by that experience.

Deputy Jose Blanco has been on the force for four years, serving his community with a smile. Blanco started as a correctional officer and quickly transferred to the Santa Barbara Police Department to become a deputy. He says it is a constant struggle to balance work life as a police officer with off-duty life, especially under the recent critical lens of public scrutiny. “I try to leave work at work, but it’s been difficult in the past couple of years,” says Deputy Jose Blanco. “My job is to help people in their lowest moments, so help me help you.” Deputy Blanco has served Santa Barbara County for four years, being rewarded by the “deep gratitude” he receives during his service. This has been tainted in recent years, influenced by high-profile cases of police misconduct.

The Public’s Perspective: Mistrust & Reform

Over the past few years, there have been many instances of police brutality that have sent shockwaves around the globe. In May, 2020, the killing of George Floyd sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, resulting in a complete shift in public perceptions of local law enforcement found in recent studies. Tyler Reny and Benjamin Newman recently studied the

Opinion Mobilizing Effect and how it impacts the public's view of police officers, due to recent police misconduct. [The American Political Science Review](#) shows how this effect has drastically changed the views on police officers, detailing the severity of the George Floyd incident on the minds of the masses. Reny and Newman, who are both Professors in the field of Political Science at Claremont and UC Riverside, found that an “opinion mobilizing” effect occurred, drastically decreasing the public’s opinion of police officers.

Some Santa Barbara locals believe the unlawful actions of several police officers are due to the lack of education that officers receive, leading to incompetence in tense situations. “My sister has to have more schooling to become a hairdresser than a police officer needs to get certified,” said Mateo Lozoya, a student at Santa Barbara City College and resident of Isla Vista. Lozoya emphasized how the lack of education is “alarming” for a profession that involves such a massive amount of responsibility. It takes around half a year to become a fully-fledged police officer, leaving a lot of room for improvement.

This lack of education is attributed to the loss of faith in local law enforcement, fueling calls for reform from Santa Barbara locals. “My father was a police officer, so I have a lot of respect for them but lately all I’ve seen is incompetence,” said Lozoya, who cited a recent altercation he had with police officers. Lozoya was cuffed and detained for carrying an alcoholic beverage past his residence, as police sought to teach him through force “There is not much understanding. Their goal was to scare me, not try to educate.”

Events like this occur regularly around the community of Isla Vista, furthering the divide between the younger generation and law enforcement.

Bridging the Gap: Community Engagement

Now, the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department has begun a new initiative focusing on community engagement. Events such as Cones with a Cop and Coffee with a Cop are seeking to mend the divide that has been created between Police Officers and Gen Z. "Our goal is to bridge the gap, and these events seek to humanize officers," said Samantha Acosta, community engagement coordinator at the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department.

"We are building a better understanding, and we strive to educate the youth through a positive presence," said Acosta, who was recently hired from the University of Santa Barbara in a new initiative by the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department.

Community engagement events offer Santa Barbara residents a chance to see officers in a new light. Events like Cones with a Cop and Coffee with a Cop are scheduled monthly, seeking to rebuild trust and foster a more positive perception of law enforcement. "We strive for a constant presence in the community with an assurance of safety by always being around when needed," said former police officer Carl Kamin, when speaking on the recent initiative of community engagement.

Kamin served in the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department for over 25 years. Over that time, he has come to believe that in a time of heightened scrutiny, the future of policing won't just be defined by laws, but by every interaction that shapes public trust—one-stop, one conversation, and one moment at a time.

Feature Outline: Behind the Badge

Lead: Setting the Scene

- Immediate hook to draw the reader into the action and highlight the unpredictability of policing.
- Brief introduction to the officer and their experience.

Nut Graph: The Bigger Picture.

- How scrutiny of police work has intensified especially among younger generations.
- Why this story matters: providing an inside look at policing in Santa Barbara.

The Ride-Along Experience

- Routine patrol details: community interactions, quiet moments, and preparation for potential incidents.
- Officer's thoughts on decision-making under pressure.

The Human Side of Policing

- Officer's personal background: why they joined the force and the biggest challenges they face.
- The emotional and psychological toll of law enforcement work

Community Perspectives

- Interviews with Santa Barbara residents, UC Santa Barbara students, and activists on their views of local policing.

- Examples of both positive and negative interactions with law enforcement.

Conclusion: Bridging the Gap

- Santa Barbara Police Department initiatives aimed at improving community relations.
- Officer's perspective on what could help rebuild trust.
- Officer's response to these concerns and how they navigate these challenges.



Santa Barbara Sheriff's Deputy Zeke Alleman police cruiser.



Santa Barbara City College student, Mateo Lozoya, pictured at his home in Isla Vista.



Goleta Police station pictured before a ride-along through the Santa Barbara area.

Social Media Plans

The multimedia and social media plans for this piece will be a series of posts, detailing the gravity of police work. There will be sets of statistics, displayed in tasteful infographics that will be shown on an interactive map of the Santa Barbara area. It will be posted to platforms, to introduce the officers and the pressing public view on police officers that will be discussed

within the article. Key quotes and glimpses into the stories attached to the article will be posted periodically until it is released for public viewing. There will also be a video walk-through of the police department and a behind the wheel of the police cruiser perspective. Canva will also be used to form an interesting and original look for the piece using the different images throughout. This will give a face to everyone incorporated in the piece and a scene setting look at the different locations.

Sample Tweets:

A negative shift in public perception has taken a drastic shift toward a negative view in public perception. But police are now working hard at mending this divide. #mendingthedivide
#publicperception

A ride- along through the streets of Santa Barbara that guides readers through the changing landscape that has been affected by the increased scrutiny towards police officers.
#shiftingmindsets #communitypolicing

How do we bridge the gap between law enforcement & the community? Ride along with police officers in Goleta for perspectives and initiatives to restore trust. #behindthebadge #publictrust

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