



DISCRETION: A POLICE OFFICER'S MOST INDISPENSABLE WEAPON

THE PARK CITY CITIZENS' POLICE ACADEMY LETS ORDINARY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE REAL POLICE WORK

As glamorous or gritty as police work may seem on the small or big screen, the nuances of each situation rarely come through in the drama. In reality, it requires meticulous attention to detail, continuous training and—above all—judgment and discretion.

The Citizens Police Academy, offered every summer by the Park City Police Department, lets members of the community step into an officer's shoes. Through a series of simulations, guest speakers, and real-life experiences, students get a sense of what the men and women in blue do and deal with every day. This year's course will be held on ten consecutive Wednesday evenings, starting May 4, with an additional Saturday field trip.

"The number one thing I want this program to do is increase transparency," said Officer Terry Knechtel, the program's manager. "We're not hiding anything, so we want to invite people in to see just how we do our job." Knechtel said this is becoming increasingly important as mobile phones and social media increase

the awareness of officer-involved altercations. "Incidents like these are worrisome," Knechtel said, "But when the press doesn't have all the facts, they fill in the blanks." Sadly, sensationalism sells more than feel-good stories. "You don't hear about all of the positive police encounters that happen every day—for example a situation of de-escalation,

Knechtel said. "But police officers don't do our job for the accolades; we do it to do the right thing."

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MARSHALING RESOURCES

The program includes presentations by several guest speakers from outside the police department, including the U.S. Forest Service, Summit County SWAT, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That these specialists hail from sister agencies reflects the reality of law enforcement in the region: a vast amount of geography with no one agency having the manpower or resources to do the whole job. "Public servants—from the bus drivers to the DEA agent—work together to protect and serve our home," said Andrew Cohen, a student from the 2015 class.





“One misconception I want to correct is that we have unlimited resources,” Knechtel said. “We’re a small agency, so we utilize the state crime lab to analyze DNA, fingerprints, and other forensic evidence. By necessity we need to be very efficient and judicious in our processes.”

The students learn about the established protocols—all of the details that can make or break a case: report writing, paperwork, documentation. And this is brought vividly to life during one of the most popular sessions: Crime Scene Investigation. Leslie Welker, PCPD’s medical examiner, and her daughter stage two crime scenes, and explain how little details could reveal clues to close the case. “Their job is tough,” said Cohen. “They need to examine everything, but can’t disturb anything.”

CAPTIVATING THE AUDIENCE

Knechtel knows he is asking his students to give up ten summer evenings, so he designs the program to be as engaging as possible. From the K9 demonstration (for which Knechtel himself dons the bite suit) to frank discussions about domestic violence, the program provides a gripping yet unvarnished day-in-the-life perspective.

Anne Worthen, a fellow student from the 2015 class, said she enjoyed even the hard topics because of how they were presented. “The domestic violence presentation and visit to Summit County Jail were both very grounding—very eye-opening,” she said.

And both Cohen and Worthen said that one of the most surprising things they learned was of the presence of gangs in Park City. “The kids in gangs are simply young people





who feel like they don't belong, but want to belong to something," said Worthen. She said the officer who gave the presentation—being a former gang member himself—can speak their language and hopefully deter some from joining in the first place. "I thought this was immensely powerful," she said.

The class also visits the gun range and learns to shoot with live ammunition. "This is an important piece of the overall education," Knechtel said. Not only does it take away some of the fear for those who've never handled a firearm, but it also helps students better understand the on-the-spot decisions that officers must make, usually with very limited information."

DISCRETION IS THE BETTER PART OF VALOR

"People often ask me what the officer's most important or effective tool or weapon is, and I can honestly say it's our discretion," Knechtel said. "We see people at their worst, and we need to be at our best. Our decision-making skills are what resolve the situation." Cohen said this was definitely brought home to him. "In every interaction, we saw how focused you need to be: it often comes down to a split-second decision-making process," he said.

Officers also understand the impression they can have on a person—even during a low-stress encounter. A single interaction can stay with someone for a long time. Worthen expressed this sentiment: "When I was 14 I was arrested for shoplifting," she said. "I was scared to death, as you can imagine, and the police officer who brought me down to the

station was awful: he was just a jerk. After that, I was very afraid of police officers, but in my twenties, I had another, different interaction. Someone tried to break into my house, and the officer who came to the scene was very calm and reassuring. He took the time to talk with me about self-defense strategies and training resources and gave me his business card. He really went above and beyond."

Knechtel ultimately hopes the participants come away with a better understanding of the public safety officials in their community. "Law enforcement officers are not the bad guys," he said. "Hopefully this course will provide some insight into their jobs." Worthen and Cohen said that Knechtel's infectious energy, enthusiasm, and dry humor make the class what it is. "Although the subject matter could have been boring, I was excited about attending each session," said Cohen. Both said they were honored to have taken part, and didn't want the course to end. "We developed such camaraderie with both the instructors and the other students," said Worthen.

The Park City Police Academy will be held on Wednesday evenings from May 4 to July 6, with an additional field trip on Saturday, June 11. To be considered for participation, you must be a U.S. citizen, cannot have a felony record, and must submit to a background check. Those accepted must commit to missing no more than two sessions. Applications are due April 15 and can be downloaded at <http://www.parkcity.org/departments/police/citizen-police-academy>. For more information, contact Officer Terry Knechtel at terry.knechtel@parkcity.org.

