



Get a Life: Living Large Away From the Job

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As police officers, we deal with a variety of very scary people in our jobs. Although most of these individuals cross our paths during the course of our duties, sometimes the most frightening individuals we have to deal with are sitting right beside us in the front seat of the patrol car.

We all know the type. He's the guy everyone calls "Robo-Cop" and if you're looking for a collection of police stuff, he's got it all: Cop tie tack, cop pen, cop watch, all the way down to the "Bad Boys" ring tone on his cell phone. When the shift is over, his personal vehicle is a used white Crown Vic with a couple of antennas on the trunk and a bumper sticker that reads "My other car has a certified speedometer." These are the people who eat, sleep, drink and do just about everything "police." What they don't realize is that as important as it is to be committed to your work, without a distraction far and away from the department, a person could find themselves committed not just to but because of their work.

I do not dispute how imperative it is to have a police mindset. That zone we put ourselves into before the start of our shift has saved countless lives, including my own. What I am addressing here is that in many instances, the constant police or "cop" attitude can be unhealthy both personally as well as professionally. In our personal lives we have it bad enough. Show me an officer who has the same circle of friends after being on the job for five years as he did before wearing the badge and I'll show you the exception. The old pals seem to go by the wayside as we surround ourselves with only those who understand "what its like." Policing accounts for the highest job-related heart attack rate and the highest divorce rate with the latest estimation at about 60%. According to the National Association of Chiefs of Police twice as many police officers commit suicide as are killed in the line of duty every year. This accounts for about 300 deaths annually. While working a shift, the job puts us in a constant state of alertness. Our training dictates that while on the job we need to maintain that state for our survival. Why then, at the end of the shift, do some chose to continue to surround themselves with the things that help maintain that stress level? The constant police attitude, like many things, is good in moderation. There are some, however, who may take it just a little too far.

I had a training officer who was adamant about drawing his weapon and clearing his own house, room by room, upon returning home after his shift. "It keeps me

sharp," he'd say. This is the same guy who could not understand why, after nineteen years of marriage, his wife left him for the insurance man. She got the house but he managed to keep his video taped collection of "Cops" episodes. On her way out, she made the comment to him about seeking "a little less adventure." I knew another guy who I thought seemed normal enough until he told me that on a first date, he brings the girl back to his house to watch the movie "Heat." If she is less than thrilled, he never calls her again. This is not normal behavior but we see it in new officers as well as the veteran. In most departments, this is the guy voted most likely to take off all his clothes and climb a tower with a high powered rifle.

Early in my career, I worked a night turn with a well-seasoned lieutenant. Even though the shift was boring and quite uneventful, at 7 o'clock in the morning he said, "Come on, let's go to the club and get a beer." I must have looked surprised but before I could respond, he continued, "A beer will help you sleep. I need a beer to help me sleep." That was my wake up call and at that moment I swore that I will never "need" a beer to help me sleep. There are good distractions and there are bad distractions. This is a good example of a bad distraction. A study of 41,000 police officers in 2001 showed an alcoholism rate of nearly 25% compared to a rate of 7.5% in the general population.

To avoid falling prey to bad distractions such as drinking heavily or collecting "everything cop," the solution is simple: Have an outside interest. We all have different ideas about what is a good distraction but it doesn't have to be an expensive or all-time consuming hobby, just something to divert the day's stresses. Picking up the video game joystick and shooting zombies doesn't really count. It has actually become more commonplace to find police officers whose distractions and hobbies pertain specifically to the job. For example, in order to keep up with the ever-changing innovations in technology many police officers are pursuing higher education while sharpening their computer skills. I knew one officer that took the downtime opportunities, while working steady third shift, to obtain his electrician's certification. Before he retired from the police force, he was able to do enough electrical side work to help put his daughter through college. Many skills that are brought to the job can be beneficial to not only furthering your career but prepare you for life after law enforcement.

I have a friend who was able to attain his degree in business and economics by taking Saturday and evening classes. He now sidelines as an investment counselor and does pretty well for himself. Obviously, the possibilities for a diversion beyond the job are endless, but it's also important to keep in mind that not all side jobs or hobbies are readily acceptable by your peers. One officer took a part-time job at Christmas time working in the frame shop of a local craft store. Although he described to me the experience of working with his hands as relaxing and even therapeutic, he was wise to not share with his fellow officers the fact that in his free time, he was helping match the right pastel colors to flower prints.

It's important to note that not all outside pursuits are practical or permissible either law or department policy. Department policies may dictate what an officer may or may not do when not on duty. In addition to department policies, local as well as state laws have been enacted restricting off-duty activities. Some of these laws include prohibiting sworn officers to own or work in establishments that sell or serve liquor while others forbid active duty police to have certification or function as private investigators.

Many off the job interests can be complicated, time consuming and expensive while others can be very simple with the best hobbies often staring you right in the face. A good friend's favorite past time is his children. Whether it's coaching his son's little league or chaperoning his daughter's school band trip, his dedication to his kids not only keeps his mind off of the stressors of work but probably helps keep him out of family court as well. Late in his career, he decided to become a School Resource Officer. This enabled him to not only spend more time with his kids but understand better the issues that his and other children face everyday.

As for my diversion, it's always been writing. As a former high school English teacher, my skills as an instructor and background in journalism has enabled me to teach in a law enforcement capacity as well as write reports that can be read without a translator.