

Narrative: Darrell Sheppard, Police Patrol Sergeant, Virginia Tech

Blacksburg, Virginia

Interviewers: Copley Decker, Landon Sachs

10/12/2011

I grew up right where I live right now, down on Prices Fork. We lived in a little four room house—my one sister and my parents had a bedroom, me and my sister had one bedroom, and we had a kitchen and a living room. The bathroom was out back, hah, that was a tickle. It was down the path thereaways. We had an old cistern... my dad had to buy water, they'd come fill that cistern up and we had a pump inside the house, kind of where your spigot would be today... just an old hand water pump.

My father was a fireman. He worked 24 hours off and 24 on. He worked from four one evening to four the next evening, then we'd go to my grandparents' house for dinner. My grandfather had a small farm and he was raising the crops and, I didn't realize it for a long time but, when I was about eight years old I learned that he was also a moonshiner, 'cause he had got caught! [*laughs*] And he went to jail.

At Tech, I started off as an equipment operator. Back at that time we dug ditches and stuff for electric surface, plumbing shop, water lines, we'd replace water breaks or whatever. After several years I was doing some other stuff, putting in signs on campus... those building signs you see on campus today, I put most of those in. My supervisor finally ended up retiring, and I ended up getting his job.

When I was in high school I started going to New River and taking police science classes, and it was interesting. My mom's brother was in law enforcement in Florida, so it's kinda how I got interested in that side of it, and I kept trying to apply at least for a year. But, I never could get my foot in my door 'cause nobody left, everybody liked the job. Then the retirement system kind of changed, and that's when they changed to where you could retire at 50 years old. They lost 14, 15 people just like that [*snaps*]. That's when they started testing. Prior to that HR would look at the applications and say, "Yeah, this is the best, this one's the best." The police department didn't have anything to do with it. So that's how I kinda got my foot in the door and I took the test, took the test with 144 people, and ended up in the top 5... I was hired 3 out of the 5.

It's unreal, Tech has changed so much. Where do I even start, jeez. The first thing that comes to mind, you know where the stadium parking lot is, for football? Well, it was all gravel, in disarray. There were telephone poles all over this place, they just laid 'em down, made lines to park against or whatever, and we used 'em as curbs. Tech Center Drive didn't exist. It only went

to the top of the hill where those old farm houses are. Of course none of the CRC [Corporate Research Center] was out there. At the time you could drive down the Burruss service drive. At the end, it went down and curved around by Cowgill and there were some caves down in there, right next to Cowgill, and you could hear water running at the time *[laughs]*.

I think it's a very pretty campus. When Sierra started looking at universities and we visited some, I won't mention West Virginia, but that's one of those *[laughs]*... one of the grossest places I was ever at in my life, I swear. And when I came to work here in '84 all the administrators were like, "We need to beautify, we need to keep this place clean, pick up the trash and make sure everything's squared away, mow the grass..." and I didn't really understand that at the time, it wasn't until I went to West Virginia with her and it hit home, but now I get it. But Tech has been good to me. The part that I don't like is all y'all being here--you messed up a perfectly good town! *[laughs]*

It's usually pretty quiet, especially at night, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. Sometimes you get a little busy. Sometimes you'll have the occasional "Somebody stole my bike" call, or "I locked my keys in my car," you know, those kinda things. During the day there's a little more crap that goes on, 'cause there's always some club doing something. On the weekends it's doors needing unlocked, and we do a lot of that, well our lock up guys do. We do a lot of walking through buildings. It pretty much runs the gamut. We get calls about everything. Awhile back, five o'clock in the evening, Vet Med calls, said they needed some help catching their duck. But no doubt, hands down, the hardest part of my job is scheduling *[laughs]*. I only have myself and 4 officers. I have to keep a minimum of a supervisor and 3. It's hard to do, especially if you have one off and one gets sick, you're already below your minimum. So that's a big headache. I guess another thing is just keeping abreast of all the changes in laws and policies and stuff. It's pretty difficult.

I got a lot of shifts that are 12 hour shifts so I got a lot of free time. I got into building instruments, I started building mandolins and I've got a pretty good business. I got 2 right now, I probably got dye on my hands, I've been putting the color on this afternoon. And I get anywhere from 2500 to 3500 dollars for 'em. I make a pretty good profit, and I enjoy doing it. I enjoy working for myself at this age. I can come and go as I want, get up when I want, go to bed when I want, I don't have somebody telling me, "You gotta wear this, you gotta put that vest on, you gotta carry that gun, you gotta train today, you got overtime tonight" *[laughs]*. I'm about over it.

I don't want to jinx myself *[knocks on table]*, but for a while there this past fall, we had what seemed like at least two or three people with mental issues every time I came to work. You

have to go to a room and get 'em because they had made threats to arm themselves or somebody else, just depression and... we deal with that quite a bit, a lot more than we used to.

When I first come to the police department we had a retired NYC cop and we had a discussion in roll call one night about what we were paid. I said, "You know I'm new at this, and I'm doing my job, but I feel like I'm not doing enough to earn the pay that I get." And he said, "We don't pay you for what you do, we pay you for what you might have to do." Interesting point, looking forward.

On April 16th, I was the first officer on the first call at AJ [Ambler Johnston Residence Hall]. And in the grand scheme of things I should have stayed with that crime scene...but my lieutenant says, "You got keys?" and I said, "Yes," and he said, "Let's go." So we took off and went to Norris. So I was over there, too, when shots were still being fired. And I was with the bunch that went in the door first, but luckily I didn't go in there. You know, I...I was told to post up at the door and not let anyone come in or out so....that's where I stayed.

I've thought a lot about it, it didn't really bother me too bad. I lost sleep a couple of days and I don't know why, my personality... I had a discussion with a dispatcher last week and she said, "You are our favorite patrol sergeant, you're the best." And I said "Why? Why would you say I'm the best patrol sergeant?" and she said, "Because you never get excited. Because if something happens you just take care of it; you handle it, you never get excited, you don't never blow up, you don't get mad—you just deal with it, it's over, and move on." So....it didn't really affect me much, I don't think. Maybe when I die and there's a grander place or whatever, I'll look back at it and say, "Yeah it probably did," but...it surely changed the way I look at people differently though, it just makes you think about everybody you come in contact with. What could they do, where could they be in 10 minutes, you know?

Not to brag on myself, but a lot of people that know me say that I can do just about anything. And I think the reason I can do just about anything is the way I was raised—splitting the wood, milking the cows—having to do that...when I was a young teenager, 12 or 13 years old, we used to go to the skating rink and I enjoyed pinball—well shoot, I couldn't go all the time so guess what I did? I built myself a pinball machine! *[laughs]* I mean, just tinkering with stuff like that, you gain a lot of knowledge and you're able to do more of those things in life... accomplish more of what you want to do.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.