

Narrative: Heath Hyatt, Patrol Officer – K9 Unit, Christiansburg Police Force

Christiansburg, Virginia

Interviewers: Brooke Shifflet, Lucas Eckert

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My name is Heath Hyatt and I'm 38 years old. I'm just a patrol officer. I'm assigned to the K-9 Unit. I work for the town of Christiansburg, Christiansburg Police Department, and I've been with this agency for a little over a year and a half. I grew up in Giles County, which is the next county over from Montgomery. Spent most of my time in the woods, huntin', fishin'. Doin' the country boy stuff [*laughs*]...There was nothin' else to do there.

I had a big family. I was...well my mom and dad divorced, so technically I had 5 brothers and sisters. I got two twin sisters who were my biological sisters, I have a step brother, step sister who I consider my brother, my sister. We grew up in small town, everybody knows everybody, we fought, fussed, cussed, carried on, just like every other family [*laughs*]. My dad's retired, he was a mechanic which was a millwright at Celanese which is the plant there in Giles County on 460. They make fiber for your blue jeans and cigarette filters. They're a company from R. J. Reynolds, which is in North Carolina. My mom...started out workin' at car dealerships, as a secretary, doin' invoices and stuff like that. She ended up getting a job with Mark Hicks which is an attorney in Dublin. She worked there for...ten, twelve years, and then she retired from the commissioner revenue in Giles County...a year, about a year and a half ago.

My wife is named Lindsey and I've got two children. I've got a son 12 years old from my first marriage and Maddie, which is my two-year-old, from my second marriage. My wife is a day treatment counselor at a school in Wythe County. She's got a degree in behavioral science; she's actually workin' on her Master's at Radford for school counseling.

I worked in machine shops. Later my brother-in-law says, "Heath, as much as you like to hunt and fish, you need to be a police officer," and I'm like, "that doesn't make sense." It does make sense. You only work thirteen days a month. So I'm thinkin', "alright thirteen days a month, I got the other seventeen days to do what I want." He stayed on me for almost a year so I started applying to police agencies. I applied to Tech, Radford University, Pearisburg. Everybody said "we'd be glad to hire you if you were certified." I wasn't certified so I applied for the police academy which was in New River, which is in Fairlawn now. I applied for the police academy, I got accepted, I went through the background, went through the physical and all

that. I paid my way through the Police Academy, which is pre-employment. Their success rate of hiring people out of the academy that didn't have jobs were really high. Half way through my 22 weeks, I had an interview with several agencies. Wytheville Police Department interviewed us. They called us back the next day and said "we'll offer you a job on you passing the academy." So that was in October. In December I passed the academy and graduated December 5th. Went to work for Wytheville Police Department.

There is nothing typical in police work, but it's either slow as it can be or wide open. There's not a happy medium. I mean you're either running your butt off to calls and answering calls or it's just, you know. Sunday mornings and Monday mornings are slow and weekends are busy. My schedule is, I work two on, two off, two on, three off, so every other weekend I'm off Friday, Saturday, Sunday. So I may work Wednesday and Thursday, which is 24 hours, and the next week, I'll pick up and work 36 hours. So it doesn't, it's not a set forty. But you've got trainin', I'm a K-9, I get called out, I have K-9 trainin' that I do twice a month. You've got court. The courts don't really care if you're off or not. So...I mean it fluctuates. My typical schedule is either 24 or 36 hours and then...and then it goes from there. But it's the best job I've ever had. Though teaching is my goal. I wanna get my, finish my Master's, and I would like to teach at a community college level. That's what I would like to do. You know if you wanna go to a university level, you're probably gonna have to have your PhD or doctorate and I can't afford it [*laughs*]. I don't have the time for it. It's just way outta my means.

The dog that I have currently is Otis, which is a yellow lab. I was the first officer in Wytheville Police Department to ever get a K-9. I implemented the program. I done all of the grunt work. I set up presentation. I done statistics to show the need for it. They were nice enough to say "if you can find one." My brother-in-law who was a cop, talked me into getting into this field, was a K-9 officer, so we called a vendor. We got him and he was right at 2 years old so he was a, they call it a green dog. He was not finished, but he had all the basics down. So, we put the finishing touches on him, certified him. I've had him since July of 2005, so he's been with me ever since. When I left Wytheville, they were kind enough to let me buy him, so I purchased him from Wytheville and brought him here. After I got off my probation here, the chief was good enough to say, "Hey, you have a \$5,000 tool. We're crazy if we're not usin' it." So I got to bring him here. We have a training group. Tech's with us. Blacksburg's with us. Pulaski, Dublin, ...Giles County, there's probably 15 or 20 of us and I'm just now going through the process of

getting my handler's certification so I can be a master trainer. So, that's something else if my other goals don't work out, I love dogs. I raise huntin' dogs. I've been around 'em for all my life, but I've had and raised dogs for the last 20 years and that got me my K-9. I mean 'cause I had the knowledge and the background. I hope if I can get my master trainer's license I can go around and certify all the other K-9s and there's not, there's not a master trainer from Roanoke to Bristol so I could cover this whole area.

The hardest thing is about the job is...trying to please the public. You just, you can't do it. I mean we're not, we're not into making friends, you know, most times we're dealin' with people, it's on the worst terms. And even though that, you know, you're, you're nice and cordial with them, I mean, they've had a bad day, somethin's went wrong with them, they called you for a reason and you're there to resolve an issue and a lot of times they don't get the resolve that they should get or need, and to me that's the, the hardest thing is...is being that customer service part of it. 'Cause we just, you can't make everybody happy.

Like, you know a nine to five, is what we call it, you know you come in nine, you're day's pretty much, you're doin' the same things, you know, throughout the day and it may, it may change from day to day, but when I come in, I mean I never know what my day holds. I may answer a few calls and deal with a few people and that may be it. I may be chasin' people down, I may be in a pursuit, I may have to fight pe-, I mean. My day is never the same and I've got stuff that I have to do, I have to go to court, I have to answer calls for service, but I can drive round and look at the trees. You know, I can drive through the neighborhoods and look at the people's houses, you know, I can take the back roads in town and just enjoy my day. I've worked factories, if I had to go back to a factory I would, I'd go sideways I think, I mean I couldn't do it.

One day I can recall was December 23rd, 2009, at two thirty PM. I was settin' up for funeral traffic, I was workin' in Wytheville. Three guys working that day, I'm senior officer workin', Sergeant's not there, I'm responsible for everybody. Get a call, we're settin' up a funeral, so we're sat at the intersections throughout town to, to block for the funeral, we do escorts. Dispatch comes over the radio, says "Shots fired inside the post office." Her voice...was screamin'...I mean it gets my blood goin' just now. I can't get my car in drive. I'm tryin' so hard to get my car in drive, I can't get it to go in drive. She comes back on the radio, says "Shots fired. Shots fired." I'm two blocks away, I get on scene, my other two teammates were already there...uh...Brandon had the backside of the building covered, Lonnie was at the front side, I

pull up beside Lonnie...Boom! Boom! Boom! Shots fired out the window at me. Lonnie was up, just enough up the road to...it couldn't hit him. I knew that the guy had a pistol, because one of the witnesses called and said he had a, looked like a nine millimeter, so from the distance I was at, I didn't feel like he could hit me and I was covered, I was behind my door of the car which is, it's not covered, it's concealment. I was hidin' my body. Um...anyway we get everybody out, get the streets blocked off. I'm a certified sniper, I get my rifle... Myself and my partner, which was my sniper partner, Dave Wall, we go up to an adjacent building, take up stand, get eyes on the guy and pretty much from two o' clock till eleven o'clock at night we were in a hostage situation. That's probably my most memorable day...Everybody got out safe, he didn't kill nobody. He had four handguns on him, was mad at the government. Was headed to Roanoke and decided that Wytheville was just a nice place to stop. So he held them hostage. So yeah, that's a day that I can pretty much recall. Made a few mistakes that day. I got on scene, 'course I had contact with Lonnie. Brandon, who was my other partner, was at the back of the building. I didn't make radio contact to make sure he hadn't entered the building 'cause we knew it was a hostage situation...um...that was a mistake I made. But, everybody lived, everybody didn't get hurt, so it was a good day, it was a good day.

Cops aren't as bad as, I mean we're human too. There's not a cop out here that hasn't broken a law, that's the one thing that kinda gets me. I've sped, I've probably run a stop sign, I've probably run a red light. Ya know, there's not stuff that I don't do, and most people we deal with are good, honest people. It's the 5% that are turds. I mean you deal with them day in and day out, it's the same people every other day, those are the people that we have to deal with. The people that get a ticket on the way to work, uh, I mean we have a job to do, there's a reason that we're doing that, whether it's our bosses are telling us "hey we need to pick this up," or there's something going on, but cops are good people and one thing that really bothers me is that I'm willing to put my life in front of y'all's, I mean that's something that I agreed to do when I took this job. Ya know, somebody is shooting with y'all, an' I'm going to step in front of it 'cause I got a vest on. And I don't think that people take, I don't think they respect the law like they used to. I mean kids talk to us like we are awful, slobs, cuss us, I mean I'm talking teenage kids and if I woulda done that, I wouldn't have had to worry about the cop beatin' me, my dad woulda beat me down. But, it's just that, I think that's one thing that bothers me, is the disrespect that we see. I mean we're not there to disrespect, I mean I'm not gonna do it. I can't speak for everybody

else, but I'm there to do my job, I'm there to try to satisfy whatever need you have and go on to my next call. I have to say the chief here and the administration are very community-oriented. They get people involved and I think it's a good thing. I mean because when you ride in my car with me for twelve hours and you see what I go through and have to put up with sometimes, you're like, most people say I wouldn't have your job for nothin', that's the common response we get. So, I think our agency is on the right track.

You know, it took me till I was 30 years old before I matured. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I really didn't, I mean I had no clue. I had no clue. So, I had no desire to get my degree until I saw the importance of it. And one thing that my degree has helped me at is, my English skills are awful, I am grammatically challenged [*laughs*], so it's helped me with my report writing. I'm going to teach for the attorney general in Roanoke. I'm a regional gang director for our area, from Roanoke to Smith County and um, they've asked me to fill in for a cancellation, so tomorrow I'm going to go speak in front of 150 people and I love that, I love it. I mean, I... that's something I like to do so... and my dreams, I didn't have any, I didn't know what, I didn't have a clue, didn't have a clue. There was no expectations of me from my family other than don't get yourself killed and don't end up in jail [*laughs*].

In 10 years, I do not want to be working swing shifts. I'm getting to the age where night shift kills me. It's a good shift, it's good work, I mean I would rather work night shift than daylight 'cause daylight you're doing a lot of gofer work. Uh, night shift, people's hidin', they're doin' crimes, it's the... the work's different. But in five years, ten years tops, I do not want to be working night shift. I would like to be off the road and in plain clothes. Either a detective, I love drugs...not to take them, but I mean drugs are my thing. I mean I got a K-9. I would like to be in vice maybe, or on the task force. That's something that I'm striving for. My 3-year plan is to have my masters, so if something doesn't change and I'm still on patrol, I will probably, I'll have enough time in that I can get out and maybe get a job teaching and still get my pension from here. Just depends on which way life goes. I'll tell you Albert Einstein has got one of my favorite quotes: "What's the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Sometimes you gotta change your ways to make things different. That's what I say [*laughs*].

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.