

Neighbors

Bringing attention to women in law enforcement, active resident gives it her all

by Alicia Smith

The crime shows on television offer audiences cool theme songs, beautiful people and a who dunnit mystery that is solved between commercial breaks.

When Detective Karla Rodriguez of the Hartford Police Department went to solve her first homicide she had a body and blood to work with. No high tech equipment, no hauling any suspicious person in for questioning, and no one-hour time slot to put all the pieces neatly together. She relied on her training, instinct, the experience of her fellow officers and her drive to do a good job. Not to mention patience.

Although television crime shows were one inspiring force that caused Ms. Rodriguez to pursue a career in law enforcement, she now laughs at the shows attempts to portray the type of work she does.

"No one knows you are working on a homicide from 1995," she said, speaking of files that sit on her desk waiting to be solved. "There are a couple on my desk that I refuse to give up on."

That is the difference between her job and her jobs portrayal on television. Cases are not to be continued on television to portray antagonists working on them week after week, or month after month. They do not show the characters also trying to solve over 40 other cases that need to be worked on, as Ms. Rodriguez and others in her division have to do. They do not depict the mountain of paper work that needs to be done on a daily basis, including keeping notes of what they are working on throughout the day, writing up reports, and picking up information from other police departments.

In addition, many shows, while they depict strong women characters, there is a gap between their jobs on television and what women in the line of duty experience.

Ms. Rodriguez has a goal to change that. While the doors of opportunities in law enforcement have opened to many women, there is still a disproportionate number of them in the field.

There were nine women in her class at the Hartford Police Academy, one of the highest number at that time. Ms. Rodriguez said she was surprised there were that many women in a class of over 50 people.

Ms. Rodriguez is the vice-president of the Connecticut Association of Women Police. Her goal for the organization has two pieces to it: to be a mentor to young women interested in a career in law enforcement and to increase membership.

The organization presently has 185 members, from police departments throughout the state, as well as members from the state police.

"We are focusing on being a network of women who support each other," Ms. Rodriguez said.

Ms. Rodriguez, 30, said too that she would like the association to become a resource for women police officers if they are facing issues of discrimination.

The association has two meetings a year, in the spring and fall. In addition, the group organizes seminars and bus trips for its members.

In terms of mentoring young women, Ms. Rodriguez and fellow board members said there is a need for it.

The hope is to have a complete mentoring program up and running by next year.

The goal is "for young women to see that we are real people, juggling a job in a male dominated field and can handle it," said Ms. Rodriguez. "They are keeping fit, they have a full plate, but its manageable and rewarding."

In addition, mentors will stress the importance of staying in school and getting an education, which can only offer many options to women.

As the mentoring program is presently in the planning stages, it is yet to be decided what age group the program will focus on. Ms. Rodriguez explained that working with girls who are 12 is important, but would it be more beneficial to work with high school aged girls who are preparing to look for a choice in a career?

Already the association has available a scholarship to high school seniors seeking a career in law enforcement. The association has been able to present \$2,500 for eligible students in the five years the association has offered the program.

CAWP is an affiliate organization of the International Association of Women Police and was first established in 1958.

"Currently our main mission is to support women in law enforcement," said President Sgt. Toni Rinaldi, who is an officer with Naugatuck Valley Community College campus police.

Sgt. Rinaldi said that some women are not interested in pursuing a career because law enforcement is too military-like and it is a long career, there are many who take up the challenge. The problem comes with departments not aggressively recruiting women.

"It's like any minority, you have to go out there and recruit, if they are not coming to you, you have to go to them," Sgt. Rinaldi said.

Issues such as pay should not discourage women, as "the pay scale is an entry level pay scale, regardless of gender," said Sgt. Rinaldi.

In addition, most departments offer a 20 years of work before a officer can retire with a full pension. This enables officer to move on to a possible second career.

"The great thing about our association is we have a large network," said Sgt. Rinaldi. "We've got women that are really moving up in the ranks and are setting an example for other women coming through," she said.

"Karla is a perfect example of a women that has really paved her own success in law enforcement," said Sgt. Rinaldi. "At the same time she does what so many women do, which is wear many hats. She's a mom, she's got a husband, she's very much into fitness and motivating people stay healthy, in turn she's a detective with the Hartford Police Department and has been for some time."

Sgt. Rinaldi said that Ms. Rodriguez has worked hard for the association in her first six months as an officer, she's started a newsletter, and has taken a pro-active role in mentoring and recruiting for more members.

"She's a real fire ball," said Sgt. Rinaldi.

Detective high energy

Ms. Rodriguez was born and raised in Hartford, and graduated from Bulkeley High School. Her mother was interested in seeing her daughter pursue a career in law, but the draw to police work was too strong. Ms. Rodriguez attended the University of Connecticut to study political science. She left after two years and attended the Hartford Police Academy. She went on to complete her degree, in business management, at Albertus Magnus. In 1995 she was hired as a patrol officer by the Hartford Police Department. Her training for police work consisted of heavy physical activity along with mental challenges. On the job, Ms. Rodriguez patrolled the streets in a squad car. She worked odd hours and her eating habits suffered. Coming off a night shift, she would have a good old fashioned hearty breakfast before going to bed. The lifestyle contributed to an unprecedented weight gain for the former cheerleader.

Her weight became such an issue, that it drove Ms. Rodriguez to the breaking point. She had gained over 45 pounds and finally, she realized she could not go on like this.

Using her strong faith in God, Ms. Rodriguez prayed that she would find the motivation. She did. Joining a gym, Ms. Rodriguez took as many exercise classes that she could fit into her schedule. That is how she discovered kick boxing. Not only did the class help her loose weight, but it introduced her to an activity that she now loves and inspired her to share that with others. She became a certified kickboxing instructor and teaches classes at Big Sky right here in town.

"I'm really into motivating people," said Ms. Rodriguez.

Rachael Medina met Ms. Rodriguez over 10 years ago and the two became friends. When Ms. Rodriguez took up instructing fitness classes she encouraged her friend to join. Since that time Ms. Medina, a Hartford resident, has followed her friend and instructor from one gym to another wherever she is teaching. "I've lost 22 pounds going to her classes," Ms. Medina said. She is a participant in all three of the classes Ms. Rodriguez teaches, including cardio kickboxing, a fast paced form of Pilate's and a combination class that incorporates kickboxing and weights. Ms. Medina said the classes are very high energy and that Ms. Rodriguez is available to not only motivate you but to make sure all her student are using the proper techniques. "She'll stay after class is over and help you," Ms. Medina said. Although Ms. Medina said she had exercised before meeting Ms. Rodriguez, her friend has gotten her involved much more. "Its been such a motivator, she pushes you to do your best, she finds our inner strength, sometimes we fell we can't," said Ms. Medina. "I love her for it, I wouldn't have done it without her."

"Karla is a fantastic person, she has been part of Big Sky since we opened 3 and a half years ago," said Mike Ciafone, club manager. "She's probably one of the top instructors in the northeast, and I can say that because she has doubled the attendance of any instructor that I've seen work."

"She brings an extraordinary amount of energy and technical skill," Mr. Ciafone said. "There are few instructors out there that can free style a class," and not have it pre-planned, he said. "She's just a pleasure to work with."

Not only can she share her enthusiasm for her exercise with others, train them in proper techniques but her classes also serve as a rejuvenator. When on a case she may work 12 hours straight, go to the gym, and return to work with new energy



and possibly new ideas that may help break a case.

Ms. Rodriguez and her husband, Gus, moved to town in the spring from Hartford. Ms. Rodriguez said they settled in town because of the school system that their now two year old daughter, Juleana, will one day attend and she said the town was beautiful.

"This is the way it should be everywhere," she said.

While working in the patrol division, Ms. Rodriguez was asked to assist as an undercover agent for the state attorney's office. This experience helped open the door for her and eventually she as asked to join the detective division where she works in the major crime squad of the Hartford Police Department. Her job has her investigating everything from homicides and assaults to robberies. Listing the attributes that she brings to the job, Ms. Rodriguez said she has "compassion for victims, an eye for detail, a drive that won't die and a good work ethic."

Ms. Rodriguez's supervisor, Sgt. David Polletta, said she was an "excellent detective," and went on to say Det. Rodriguez was "very persistent, thorough and very dedicated to her job."

The most crucial time for a case is the 48 hours following a crime. Because of this Ms. Rodriguez has no set schedule but has a supportive husband who is available as well as a loving family, including her mother Anna Martinez, that all help out caring for the couples two year old daughter.

"Unfortunately, you take them home with you," she said of some of the cases she works on. "You feel their pain," she said of a victims family.

On the one hand, however, she said that in a small way she has become desensitized to the violent nature of some of the crimes she investigates. This is necessary because she has to remove herself from what happened in order to get a better handle on the situation and begin solving the crime.

"You have to take yourself out of the situation," she said. "You have to look at it that this is not my brother or my sister, I have a job to do here."

It is not until after evidence has been collected and the scene cleaned up when Ms. Rodriguez said she can go back and think about what exactly happened and what it was she had been looking at. "It makes you sick to your stomach," she said. "You use that feeling and turn it into the drive you need to get the job done."

When investigating a crime it is a collaborative effort among Ms. Rodriguez and other members of her division. Often they entire division will gather for a roundtable discussion to get the thoughts of everyone and to network.

"You share your disgust, share your drive," she said. "Its healthy for your case and its healthy for you."

"Our unit is a tight knit group," Ms. Rodriguez said. "We all bring something different and we are appreciative of that."

For more information on the Connecticut Association of Women Police, call Karla Rodriguez at 527-7300 ext. 5224.

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