

24 Hours on Patrol

Waves, weapons and warnings

Law officers encounter best, worst of Grand Island

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The Independent

Most times, the view from the driver's seat of a Grand Island patrol car is very reassuring, resembling something from a 1990s version Norman Rockwell painting.

As police Sgt. Marty Totzke drove around town on Saturday afternoon, July 6, a significant percentage of the drivers he met gave him a friendly wave. Other people who were outside their homes, doing yard work, also waved at Totzke's passing patrol car.

Such congenial contact with the public is not a constant in Grand Island, where police officers have their share of antagonistic encounters with people who run afoul of the law, including those situations involving either potential or actual violence.

To get an idea of what happens during a 24-hour period on patrol in Grand Island, The Independent assigned reporters and photographers to ride along with officers during portions of the night and day shifts on July 6. Other reporters monitored the police scanner to record the incidents officers encountered that day.

During Totzke's patrol around Grand Island, some people waved because they recognized him. Others waved simply to acknowledge an officer.

The tableau was repeated with other officers on other shifts.

Officer Jim Glad, who patrols from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., didn't receive friendly waves during the nighttime hours. But on that particular night, most of Glad's contacts with people were congenial and polite.

The overall impression this creates is of a community where most residents respect and trust their police force. That respect is returned by officers.

Totzke, who has family in Chicago, knows this situation doesn't exist in every community.

When I go back home, I wave to the officers out of habit," Totzke said. They look at you like you're nuts. They're trying to figure out what you're up to."

Totzke said he is especially careful to return greetings from young children, a lesson he learned from his supervisor during his first year as a police officer. Little kids like to wave," he said. If you don't wave back, they really do look crushed. If the officer doesn't seem to care, it doesn't come across well."

Even when police officers meet citizens in less-than-ideal situations, congeniality often prevails.

Officer Rick Ressel made three traffic stops in less than an hour that Saturday afternoon, with all of them cordial.

One person Ressel stopped was a 19-year-old from Fullerton who was speeding on Capital Avenue near the Nebraska Veterans Home. Ressel issued a warning but no citation. The driver thanked him.

Ressel predicted his third traffic stop moments before it happened, correctly forecasting that the driver of a Buffalo County car stopped in a left-turn lane at a traffic light was going to drive straight ahead.

Ressel issued a warning ticket to the 71-year-old Kearney driver, who was clearly embarrassed that he had unknowingly made an improper lane change.

Just like Ressel on the day shift, Glad's contacts with the public were cordial, even when he had to issue more than a warning.

At midnight, Glad stopped someone for having a headlight out. The orange Datsun pickup pulled into the Ampride station on Webb Road.

After making the stop, Glad got out of the car and walked toward the pickup. There was no need for flashlights and sirens. Glad didn't want to embarrass the man any more than he had to. The officer smiled and started a conversation.

Is that your daughter? How old is she? Two? Any reason you don't have her in a safety seat?"

After collecting the necessary paperwork, he got back in the car and frowned. The man was the girl's grandpa and he was baby-sitting her. He was just out to get some gas for his lawn mower. The girl tumbled out of the car, cute as a button, ready for bed in her pajamas. Glad felt bad.

I hate writing tickets," he muttered. He had planned to give him just a warning for the headlight, which he did, but he pretty much had to issue a citation for the safety seat violation.

I usually try to say something nice, because I know I ruined their day. They told us in rookie training never to say, Have a nice day.' Giving out more warnings than full-fledged tickets is not unusual, according to Glad, Totzke and Ressel.

We try to give out more warnings than citations," Glad said.

The goal of both a warning ticket and actual citation is the same: to encourage voluntary compliance with the traffic laws, the three officers said. It's up to the officer to decide whether compliance can be achieved through a warning or whether only a ticket will do.

While patrolling for traffic violations is a big part of a police officer's responsibility, they also must be aware of other law enforcement issues.

At the start of Totzke's shift, he briefs other officers from the board." It contains reports about cases such as missing children, stolen vehicles or people who have escaped from the Hastings Regional Center. Vacation house checks

are listed. Incidents from locations within a 50- to 60-mile radius of Grand Island may be included, too.

Shift change is pretty routine," Totzke announced before July 6 duty. He concluded the briefing by telling officers what section of Grand Island they would cover.

While Totzke, Ressel and Glad all talked about how much of their job is routine including lots of paperwork it can be punctuated with excitement.

At 1:07 a.m., Glad was dispatched to a domestic dispute in the parking lot of the Ole Cow Palace.

A man and woman, in the process of getting a divorce, got into a fight. He questioned the man involved, while other officers pursued the woman, who had been drinking.

Glad asked for all the details of the fight, and the man was very cooperative. When Glad asked if he'd been drinking, the man told him yes four beers and two Mountain Dews. Glad asked him not to drive, and the man agreed.

If caught, the woman faced possible drunk driving charges, along with third-degree assault.

All three officers noted that the 24 hours covering July 6 had been much quieter than usual for a Saturday in Grand Island.