



Peace Officers, partners with our community

By Chief Tighe O'Meara - May 20, 2019

The Ashland Police Department recently launched a new initiative that sees the words "PEACE OFFICER" affixed to each of the patrol cars. This was done in conjunction with the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, an organization I am proud to serve as a Commissioner.

But what does this mean? What is the difference between a police officer and a peace officer? Indeed, what is the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission all about? Isn't all of this just another example of Ashland being Ashland? Well, if that is the way one chooses to see it, so be it. However, I would suggest a different perspective.

True, the APD will continue to arrest people if they have violated the law and an arrest is appropriate, we are still police officers and that is one of our core duties. The answer doesn't rest in the "what" of what we do, but rather in the "how."

There has been a new best practice in law enforcement nationally that I firmly believe in and that I encourage my team mates to employ as much as possible. This practice is called "Procedural Justice." This practice dictates that each person be treated with respect, each person be given a chance to be truly heard, each person given neutrality in decision making and, perhaps most importantly, it dictates that a person's dignity never be challenged.

This is one of the important ways we, as your police department, have been striving to best engage and serve the community for the last few years. This sort of approach to police work is something that my predecessor, Terry Holderness, started and that we are carrying forward wherever possible.

Another important practice in best serving the community is working toward building and nurturing relationships and partnerships. I realized the truth of this very early on when I took over the chief's position. I know that it is only through partnerships that we will survive moments of stress that test those relationships. This is something that all APD officers strive to do everyday.

Do we always get it right? Of course not. The men and women of your police department do a great job, day in day out. They are asked to do a difficult job in a town that is not always accommodating to the work a police department does. They are asked to make quick and

critical decisions with very little information. And they usually get it right. But, not always, because in the end police officers are not faceless creatures that only exist to fill a blue uniform. Rather, they are members of our community that choose to spend their days and nights trying to make our community a bit better, and a bit safer. And all members of our community miss a beat from time to time, police officers included.

The win, though, is in the fact that any person, any member of the community, can walk into my office, or the deputy chief's or the lieutenant's and say "Hey, I think you got something wrong." To which we will respond "OK, let's talk about it and figure it out." In that we can build a relationship. In that we can build a bridge. In that we can foster better mutual understanding. And in that we can earn the designation of peace officer.

This is also how I view the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. To me it does not mean that each person in the community gets his or her way. It does not mean that we do not have disagreements. It means that when we are faced with those disagreements we will try to find a way to navigate the dispute in a way that respects each side, and allows each side to be heard, not challenging the validity of any side's opinion.

So, yes, to me, the peace officer designation is something that has meaning, and it is not a proclamation that we are perfect. It is a reminder that we want to partner with community, we want to offer every person respect and we want to value all opinions. We will still be your police officers, that is our duty. How we (strive to) carry out that duty rests in the "peace officer" designation. I think there is substance to that. If you have a different opinion give me a call or stop by, and we will work on our relationship building.

Police Chief Tighe O'Meara believes strongly in community engagement and creating trusted relationships. He serves in various roles with the Police Executive Research Forum, La Clinica, the Rotary Club of Ashland Lithia Springs, the Elks Lodge, and the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission.