

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Earlier this month, a child ran away from school. A teacher followed the child who was running through a wooded area in the direction of a heavily-trafficked road. For the privacy of the child, I will not mention the name of the school or provide details about the student; those facts do not matter. What matters is a student was upset, fleeing on foot, and headed toward a busy highway.

In response to a 911 call, several deputies flooded the area. One of them caught the child, mere feet from the shoulder of the road. He wrapped his arms around the student from the back in a cradling bear hug and sat down, functioning almost as a human car seat. Once seated, however, he could not get back up. The ground was muddy and the child was fighting, struggling, and screaming “Let me go!” Trying to stand from a seated position, without the use of one’s arms, is surprisingly difficult to do.

Two deputies positioned their cruisers between the pair and the passing traffic. The space was so narrow, their vehicles were partially in the travel lane. Traffic had to move into a center turning lane to pass them.

Before the situation resolved, community members began calling our front desk. Some people inquired about the heavy police presence in the area. When told we were helping with a child who ran away from school, a few callers asked whether that was a law-enforcement matter. Others wanted to know how many adults it takes to “wrangle” a child, and we later started seeing posts on Facebook about deputies giving a child CPR.

Although I suppose we could get defensive about such calls, we recognize these inquiries for the opportunities they present. The general public does not know what our jobs are like on a day-to-day basis, and it is easy to make incorrect assumptions about unfamiliar things. No doubt motorists were troubled by what they saw, and the Facebook posts reflect their efforts to make sense of the scene. We routinely face multi-dimensional problems and rapidly evolving situations. We must creatively problem solve within the framework of the law and our training.

Every deputy who responded to this call played a pivotal role, and is therefore part of the reason for the heavy police presence. As I’ve said before, “law enforcement” is too narrow of a term to describe our work. We offer community support, and our deputies

are safety professionals. I can't think of another agency with the skills, training, equipment, mobility, and response time to handle the situation I describe above.

The child in question verbalized an adamant refusal to calm down, and continued to struggle and yell, "Let me go." Although the deputy kept the child's arms pressed against his abdomen, he still managed to grab a shoe and throw it striking an approaching deputy in the head. Then, as two deputies tried to help the sitting deputy stand, the child freed one of his arms momentarily. He picked up a stick and rapidly thrust it overhead, trying to strike the face of the confining deputy. One of the assisting deputies partially blocked the thrust; the stick lightly scratched the holding deputy's face, narrowly missing his eye.

In all, it took five adults to resolve this situation – six counting the teacher. Luckily, the deputy who held the student has specialized, advanced training in Gracie Survival Tactics (GST), or it might have necessitated more. GST is a martial art, modified for use by law enforcement, military, and first responders. Practitioners use principles such as leverage and distance management when grappling with an opponent, regardless of the other person's size. The deputy in this situation knew how to keep the child safely contained until he ran out of gas.

The child eventually calmed down. Obviously, confidentiality requirements prevent us from saying more about the situation, but I want to assure the public that the child was not harmed. Professionals with the school and the child's parents are working to meet his needs.

I am grateful to the *News of Orange* for providing me this forum to educate the community about our services, and I am glad people care enough to call my office when they see something that concerns them. If you'd like to learn more about our work, please contact Lieutenant Roberson at our office to talk about joining an upcoming Citizens' Academy. His number is (919) 245-2921.