

THE LOWDOWN

October 26, 2022

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

When you see a law-enforcement vehicle race by with lights on and sirens blaring, do you wonder where it is going? Do you enjoy police shows on television and wonder if they are realistic? Are you intrigued by radios, body-worn cameras, and forensic science?

I am happy to report that after a COVID-19-induced hiatus of more than two years, we recently resumed hosting our Citizens' Academy. Participants meet on Wednesday nights to learn about all aspects of their sheriff's office in this eight-week program. I say "their sheriff's office" deliberately. This is not MY office. It is the office of the people who elected me to represent them.

Born out of the idea that we want to tell our story to the public we serve, we started the academy in September 2017. People want to know where we go, why we go, and what we do when we get there. The Citizens' Academy is designed to answer those questions and more. We offer an in-depth look into the many divisions at our office. Class members learn about the duties of a patrol deputy, the techniques of a criminal investigator, and the complexity of civil process. We introduce them to our courtroom responsibilities and take them on a tour of the county detention facility. They also take a field trip to the 911 communication center, hear about our Crisis Unit, and listen to a presentation by school resource officers. Without exception, each class reports they had no idea how much we do, and how complicated and nuanced it is to provide the comprehensive services a sheriff's office offers.

The Academy is informational, and it is also experiential. On the first night, after introductions and an office overview, class members drive our golf cart through a cone course wearing special goggles that simulate the perception of a drunk driver. A few weeks later, investigators will teach about evidence collection and crime scene techniques, and challenge students to collect clues and develop suspects by processing a mock crime scene. On the night the students learn about criminal and constitutional law, they will have the opportunity to use the Shoot/Don't Shoot training simulator. This technology presents users with realistic situations that require them to make complicated decisions under pressure. Do they shoot the suspect before he shoots them? Or wait – was the object in his hand actually a cell phone?

Short of actually working here, the Citizens' Academy is the very best way for a person to develop a comprehensive understanding of what we do and how we function. Ten students are currently enrolled; our alumni include seventy-one others. We enjoy the opportunity to bridge the gap between our office and community members. We find

people have preconceived and often inaccurate perceptions about the law-enforcement profession and the people who work within it.

Academy organizer, Lieutenant Daniel Roberson, reports the most rewarding part of the process for him is repeatedly hearing from participants that they are astounded when they learn how multi-faceted our work is and how many initiatives and partnerships we have geared toward improving the quality of life in Orange County. He looks forward to starting a youth academy for teens and young adults considering a career in law enforcement. We think they, too, will be surprised and excited to learn how many different specializations a person can develop within a law-enforcement career. For example, we have drone pilots, K9 handlers, a tactical unit, and traffic-enforcement specialists.

At the end of the class, participants are invited to continue their association with the office through our VISION (Volunteers in Service in Our Neighborhoods) program. This group works with us at community and ceremonial events, helps out in the office, and raises funds for special projects, such as the equipment we use for our Lifetrack program.

Our current class represents a broad range of life experience and professional accomplishments. One student is considering possible career paths after working as a registered nurse. Another is a former police officer and evidence technician who enrolled because he wanted to learn about recent changes and new approaches in the profession. A third person joined the class after moving to the area. He felt attending would be a good way to learn about the Hillsborough/Orange County community, and he wanted to understand more about the difference between a police department and a sheriff's office.

If you would like to apply for an upcoming Citizens' Academy, please email Lt. Roberson at troberson@orangecountync.gov.