

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Fun fact: Thanksgiving is tomorrow, and November 28 is the latest day upon which the holiday can fall. By the time the weekend is over, it will be December. Therefore, now is the perfect time to share one of my favorite holiday traditions – Shop with the Sheriff – which is December 6 this year.

This annual event is a major undertaking at our office. It requires energy, dedication, and enthusiasm to pull off. We start by partnering with social workers at Orange County elementary schools. They identify approximately 25 children whose family's circumstances make holiday celebrations particularly challenging. Most commonly, those factors are financial, but the selection process is not one-dimensional. The social workers also consider students for whom community support and a joyous morning might provide respite from other negative factors influencing their childhoods.

Chief Deputy Tina Sykes puts her heart and soul into making Shop with the Sheriff a success. She will tell you that it is, by far, the most rewarding day of the year. I asked her why she loves it so much, and she said, "It's the look on their faces when we pick them up. It is pure joy. Just for a little bit, it is all about them, and they can be distracted from whatever it is that makes their lives difficult."

Bus driver Kay McPherson sets the tone. As the students board the bus at each school, she tells them to pretend she is driving Santa's sleigh. She points to the patrol cars and motorcycles waiting in front of the bus and compares them to reindeer clearing the path. The kids love watching the escort vehicles as they stop traffic to let the bus proceed unimpeded to the next stop, and eventually to Wal-Mart, which we refer to as the North Pole.

Once they arrive, I climb on the bus to greet the kids and pump them up even more. I want them to know how excited we are to spend the next few hours with them. As each student steps off the bus, a detention officer, deputy, staff member, or volunteer greets them, armed with a list of that child's clothing sizes and general interests. During the ensuing shopping experience, students can purchase whatever they want up to the spending limit. Some race around and select their items within 10 minutes. Others are more discerning. They proceed slowly, carefully considering costs and making deliberate choices.

It never fails that at least one child will purchase presents for parents or siblings instead of buying gifts for him or herself. One year, a group of kids who recently arrived in North Carolina from a warmer climate only wanted to buy clothes and boots suitable for winter. And poignantly, some children ask if they can purchase groceries. As you might imagine, requests like the ones I am describing really yank our heartstrings.

We shop in advance and purchase an outfit, jacket, gloves, and a hat for each participant. Additionally, generous businesses donate restaurant gift cards and practical items like toothbrushes and toothpaste. Most of the credit for sourcing these extra surprises goes to First Lieutenant Daniel Roberson who leads our Community Services Division. He builds relationships throughout the year and helps people understand how necessary widespread support is to the success of this initiative.

The management team at Wal-Mart pulls out all the stops. The staff clearly enjoys the bedlam, extra cashiers work dedicated checkout lines for us, and we have permission to take over the employee breakroom for a pizza-party. While we celebrate with the kids, volunteers pack the gifts into Santa's giant red gift bags for transportation back to the schools where parents pick them up.

As we run around the store, other shoppers stop and stare, and no one seems annoyed by the chaos. Every year, some shoppers press cash into our hands or ask how they can donate. Fortunately, that process is easy. The Sheriff's Office Citizens' Organization, a 501(c)(3) organization, accepts tax-deductible contributions throughout the year to sponsor such initiatives. They also host fundraisers like the spring Chicken Pickin' and the Hog Day roasted corn sale. We are grateful for their support.

We always get back more than we give as the children reward us with smiles, hugs, and silliness. If you need an hour or so of holiday cheer, come witness the fun at the Hampton Pointe Wal-Mart on December 6! If you can't make it, get in the spirit by viewing photographs on our app and Facebook page.