

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

If you enjoy a good understatement, how's this one? This year has been difficult. However, despite the pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism, and in many ways because of them, there have been upsides. For example, we are working with other components of the justice system and involved stakeholders in new ways. These efforts have resulted in innovative approaches and initiatives that are both efficient and economical. We can see this in bond reform and other efforts to lower the population in the Detention Center. These new procedures allow for the effective and safe pre-trial management of alleged offenders in the community. I will write more about this subject in a future column.

For this year-end-review edition of *The Lowdown*, I asked my staff to reflect on other 2020 upsides.

Captain Nate Fearington related how much he enjoyed our annual Shop with a Sheriff event. He said, "Even though we couldn't actually shop **with** the kids due to COVID-19, we were still able to purchase wish list items and bundle them into Santa sacks for special delivery. It made me feel good to hear employees and other shoppers say how proud they were that we 'made a way out of no way' and continued our tradition."

Tom Parker, one of our IT Specialists, mentioned several highlights. We converted many desktop computers to notebooks, allowing staff to work remotely. He is really excited about SmartForce, a new work management system used to communicate more efficiently across divisions. Additionally, a new database streamlined our training records, and we are preparing to launch a new app, giving the public tools to interface with us directly from their Smartphones. Watch for that in 2021.

Captain Tina Sykes, who directs our School Resource Officer Program as well as the Training Division, noted, "We donated more than 6,200 items of food to the Orange County Schools Holiday Food Drive. We pitted the nine divisions in the office against each other, and the competition was ferocious. It tickled me to see them try to outdo each other, driving up the value of the matching donation promised by the Command Staff."

Tim Jones, Captain of the Detention Division, answered my query with a personal anecdote. “I had a very unfortunate tib/fib break to my leg, which kind of summed up the year 2020. I was out of work for over a month. I quickly learned the friendships made at the Office extend way past quitting time. From calls, to visits, and of course, food, I was astonished with the amount of caring I received from folks at the Sheriff’s Office and from the wider community.

Ashley Woodlief, a sergeant with the Criminal Investigations Division, noted the year began with the sentencing of John Russell Whit – the long awaited conclusion to a 1998 case in which a lawn mowing crew found the skeletonized remains of a 10-year-old boy. Closing that cold case helped another agency solve his mother’s related murder. Woodlief and her colleagues are pleased that for the fifth year in a row, they solved all new homicide cases, and she is relieved there were only two!

Deputy David Funk is one of our three K9 handlers. He reports the dogs assisted with over 300 calls, located 23 people, found 117 items of evidence, and sniffed out 10.25 pounds of narcotics. Individual highlights included K9 Tres running a successful track following a hit and run, despite the track being almost five hours old. Callie located a suspect from a different wreck who had buried himself and a large amount of narcotics, while Zar helped the Highway Patrol locate a firearm thrown from a vehicle during a traffic stop.

Community Services Division Major Kevin Jones is most proud of the way his division and the Department on Aging collaborated to take the place of the volunteers who usually deliver meals to seniors in the community. “Due to COVID-19, our deputies, in partnership with the municipal police departments, delivered more than 2,000 hot lunches, emphasizing the ‘serve’ part of our duties. We also coordinated the distribution of more than 2,200 food boxes, and we delivered more than 2,000 meal kits donated by Food Lion.”

My Chief Deputy Jamison Sykes summed it up well. He said, “This was a hard year, and a strange year. We are ending it tired. But it’s the good kind of tired; the kind where you know you worked hard and you will sleep well, and you are excited to see what tomorrow will bring.”