

AMHERST BULLETIN

Amherst Insider: 'Inconsistent with life' - - police navigate horror to do their job

By NOAH HOFFENBERG Staff Writer

Published on September 11, 2009

At police departments across the country, not all 911 calls are equal. Cows in the road, for instance, may not get the same kind of rapid-fire officer-on-the-scene result that a tip on a drunk driver might. But there is one kind of call that tends to clear a police station faster than if the place were on fire: a child in danger.

"Whenever I hear a call that comes in relative to a child, whether it's a child that's choking or an abuse case or a motor vehicle accident, I think that we as policemen - and as parents, as fathers, just as other human beings - feel as though there's an increased necessity to go and do what you can to make the situation better," said Young, the father of an 8-year-old daughter.

Young got one of those calls at 8 a.m. on Sept. 30, 2008.

"I heard a radio transmission dispatching patrols to the area of Summer Street," Young writes in his supplemental crime scene narrative a few days after the incident. "The report to responding patrols was that a child had been struck by a school bus."

That child was 2-year-old Abraham Espinoza, a regular bus stop companion to his mother and his older sister, a student at Wildwood Elementary.

The toddler, who celebrated his birthday days before on Sept. 19, was dead. This past week, a final report on the accident was released, clearing the bus driver of responsibility for the death.

It was one of those accidents that no amount of police work could make better - not for Abraham, his mother, his sister, or any of the several neighbors who tried to comfort them that day.

And it's exactly that kind of horrific accident that can weigh on a cop's mind, or add to the stress of being subjected to dark and dangerous territory daily.

"I think in situations like this, it may be difficult because when you get up there, we've now gone from a lifesaving role to an investigative role," said Young, "and I think that's tough on the officers."

Young keeps his emotional cards close to his chest. In an interview last week, he didn't want to talk about what was going on inside his head or his gut that day last September.

He did say, however, how he and other police navigate the horror of accidents or crime scenes when the circumstances are too much to take.

Young credited a rigorous training program for recruits with helping to carry them through bad situations.

"Our cops (receive) a tremendous amount of training, and I think that is when you see the benefit come out, when they get to a situation like that, that I know is very difficult emotionally. There are a lot of sights and sounds that you see out there that are really kind of tough to deal with," said Young. "When they're able to focus in on what their training is and what they're supposed to be doing, you become a problem-solver as opposed to floundering around."

And, thus, they throw themselves into the investigation, mired in every detail, down to the millimeter.

"While en route, I noted that the traffic was moderate. The day was clear and warm. Road conditions were dry."

The details of the investigation into Abraham's death run deep: make and model of vehicle; tire marks; location of biological matter; photographs; measurements; reenactments of line of sight using bus mirrors.

The devil, as they say, is in the details. They make or break a case, just as they can make or break an officer.

Young said that in days gone by, the build-up of work-related stress caused some cops to express themselves in a negative way.

"There's been a history of law enforcement over the years, that was, years ago, of self-destructive behavior. It was kind of the norm. Guys now, they are more attuned to things like this. It's more openly discussed," said Young.

"I'm not saying that it doesn't still go on. But I look at these young fellas around here, they spend a lot of time in the gymnasium, outdoor activities, they mountain bike, they do all kinds of different things. It's a whole lot healthier than it was even 15 or 20 years ago."

"I think everybody who's involved in situations like that, whether they're a cop or as a firefighter that was up there, I think they all deal with things in a different way," said Young. "Some guys internalize it; some guys squeeze their kid," said Young, who lives in Granby. "I'm a very family-oriented guy; that's my stress reduction."

"The area was roped off via crime scene tape and monitored by officers. The driver of the bus ... stayed on the bus until he was removed for evaluation at Cooley Dickinson Hospital and later interviewed by Sergeant Menard."

According to studies, police officers face the possibility of a host of physical and mental problems because of work-related stress, from heart attacks to post-traumatic stress disorder. A recent study at the University of Buffalo (N.Y.) suggested that counseling be made available to officers before and after traumatic incidents.

Young didn't want to say whether counseling was embraced or rejected within the Amherst Police Department, but he did offer his own diagnosis for officers who can't let go of the dark side of the job.

"I'm wondering if the people who (wrestle with these kinds of cases) are the people who never come to grips with that they can't change the world," said Young. "It is a terrible thing that Abraham Espinoza died that day. It is a hideous, tragic (thing). I wish that I could change it, but I can't. So the only thing I can do is to do what my assignment is correctly, and I think we do that."

As Young sees it, common sense is more important than emotion in police work.

"Cops fail for a lot of different reasons. Sometimes we can train guys to do things in a certain way in a certain order, and they can become trapped in that, instead of recognizing and realizing that every situation is different, that personalities and emotions do play into some of these things. That being said, for you to be effective at your job, you can't allow those emotions to really run the way you do your job, because there'd be no consistency, because emotions aren't consistent," said Young.

"You have to rely on your training, past practices and policy to drive what you do."

"I observed the child, who was still in the rear of the Amherst Fire Department ambulance. ... it was clear that the child's condition was inconsistent with life."

Nowadays, the lieutenant can look back on himself in 1987, when he was patrolman Ronald Young, and see that he had no idea that there would be days like Sept. 29, 2008, in which a 2-year-old boy is killed and there's no one to blame.

"They never taught me how to solve that (kind of) problem at the academy. They taught me how to write a ticket," said Young.

"Trust me, when I was 20 years old, I didn't know I was signing up for Abraham Espinoza."

Email Noah Hoffenberg at nhoffenberg@gazettenet.com.