



Citizen's Arrest

A whole new perspective

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The purpose behind the Citizens Police Academy is to promote an understanding between the public and local law enforcement. The purpose behind having two members of the local media in the Citizens Police Academy is to get the word out to citizens who will eventually (hopefully) participate in future academies.

It's a good thing to know that citizens are watching and reading these weekly reports. It's even better to know that people are talking.

First, there are the eight of us in the current pilot academy that are talking. We're meeting twice a week, four hours per session, for a total of eight hours a week. By the time we've completed the academy, we will have spent 32 hours together. You can do a lot of talking in 32 hours.

Secondly, the police officers are talking. Throughout the course of the academy, we will have been introduced to and taught by nine different officers in addition to Police Chief Mike Steffes, who so far has attended all but one session. This is all new territory for them as well as for us. They talk and teach, which is no easy job any way you slice it, and we listen, interact, and evaluate. You might say we're all in this thing together.

As a result of all this in-class talking, an interesting thing has been happening... defenses are being let down. Everyone is laughing a lot more. The officers seem more at ease with us and vice versa. Maybe it's refreshing being around people who aren't screaming at them or accusing them of wrong doing, or it could just be our naturally charming personalities.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the people reading these weekly reports are talking. You're talking to Police Chief Steffes. I know because he told me so. The Chief has been getting calls from people who are interested in participating in future academies. The plan, according to Chief Steffes, is to have one academy annually, probably in the spring of the year, pending ap-

proval of the city council, of course. The Chief is taking names and making a list of interested people for future academies.

There's also talk of starting an academy alumni association. We, the first graduating class, have been trying to work out the alumni perks package, which could include things like one "get out of jail free card," a "speeding ticket pass," or free doughnuts and coffee at the station on Mondays. The Chief isn't buying any of this baloney.

And speaking of baloney, I've heard my share of it since starting the academy. I know people are reading along and following my exploits, and most of what I've heard has been positive. Readers pat me on the back and say, "This is great that you're doing this." I agree, of course, but what I want to say (and sometimes do) is, "Yeah, it is great, so why don't you do it, too."

I think there's something to be said for getting to know what someone else does. I know I've had some of my preconceived notions about "cops" shattered in the past weeks.

In fact, I had the opportunity this week to talk to someone I know quite well who doesn't like cops, and I do mean doesn't like cops. As the story of a recent disorderly conduct charge came pouring out, and the "oh, woe is me, I'm the victim here" attitude started filling up my telephone line, I said, "Well you're just lucky it wasn't me handling that call because I would have probably shot you." (Did I mention that I know this person very well?)

That shut my caller up. And then the onslaught came, and I heard the very worn "cops are a para-military force" and "they're all corrupt" routine. "Yeah, yeah, tell it to the judge," I said, feeling more than a little miffed.

Are there corrupt cops? You betcha. And there's also corrupt politicians, accountants, bankers, car dealers, businessmen, school administrators, journalists, lawyers, and might I add, hair stylists. (Let me tell you a botched hair cut is pretty darned corrupt.) Corruption abounds and life goes on.

Then I turned the tables on my caller. "And what would you have done if you had been the officer responding?" I asked. "The officer walks away and someone gets hurt, and then he or she is accused of being negligent. The officer makes an arrest and now he or she is accused of wrong doing. So what would you have done?"

Silence.

Yeah, that's what I thought.

(Editor's note: Columnist Laurie Lenten is participating in the first Rhinelander Citizens' Police Academy, and is filing weekly reports on her experience.)