



Citizen's Arrest

The gamut of emotions

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I was approaching meltdown and I knew it. As the line between workplace objectivity and personal emotion began to blur, I chose the path of least resistance—escape. The walls were closing in on me, and whether it was personal pride or professional dignity I'm not sure, but I had no intention of crashing and burning inside of a Rhineland Police Department squad car.

We had been on the streets a little shy of three hours when I asked Officer Chad Brown to take me back to the station. In the time it took us to drive from the county jail back to the police station we got to the heart of this story. The proverbial chaff blew out the window, leaving me staring at something a little weightier and more substantial...the good, the bad, and the ugly of it all.

In a moment that can only be described as surrealistic, one question stood out in my mind and I turned to Officer Brown and asked, "How do you do this?" It was neither meant to be a rhetorical question or a way to politely pass the time as we drove.

I had met up Officer Brown at 7 p.m. for my scheduled ride-along as part of the Citizens Police Academy. That afternoon, as the snow began to fall, I thought to myself, "Tonight is probably going to be filled with accidents and who knows what else."

It's the "what else" that'll get you every time.

In our time together, there was blood, vomit, OC spray (pepper spray), a jailhouse fight, drawn tazers, a vehicular domestic dispute, alcohol, drug paraphernalia, pregnancy, rescue vehicles, a missing person and slippery streets. If any one of the four or five calls that Officer Brown responded to while I was riding shotgun had been judged on its own merit, none would have been considered particularly exciting or out-of-the-ordinary. In fact, Officer Brown said it was pretty much a business-as-usual Friday night, meaning anything you could imagine might possibly happen.

Going from one call to the other, though, was like playing a game of emotional dominoes—one wrong move and the whole strategically placed line of defense would tumble. One minute Officer Brown and I were discussing how life's stresses combined with alcohol consumption can make people do things they wouldn't ordinarily do—

like go missing—and the next we were on scene watching a pregnant woman trying to literally worm her way out of jail time.

Both calls conjured up very different kinds of feelings. Two women with very different problems—one I wanted to pat on the back and offer some sense of assurance, while the other I just wanted to slap. There I said it. I was sitting in a squad car entertaining thoughts of violence mingled with disgust, sympathy and hopelessness as well.

With literally no time to process that scene, we were on our way to the Sheriff's department for a fight in progress. A common occurrence? No, but a reality nonetheless when tempers flare and personal space is at a minimum.

Considering the road conditions we made good time. On a lighter, somewhat more humorous note, one of the guards that met us was determined to lock me in a holding cell for my own protection, but Officer Brown had my back and insisted that they put me in a pod (the secured area of the jail) instead.

From our bird's eye vantage point, the guard and I could see the action unfold. Contrary to popular jokes on the subject, it wasn't much like being at the zoo at all. I'm not a big fan of zoos anyway. The big cats always bother me. Their incessant pacing and hungry eyes makes me want to free them, but I know they'd probably turn and kill me.

No, it definitely wasn't a zoo. It was more like a warehouse of hopelessness, with holding cells neatly stockpiled one tier upon the other. Don't get me wrong, all of the people involved had made their own choices. Some chose to become cops and others chose to go missing or do drugs or pick a fight over television programming, but ultimately everyone paid, or will pay, the price for those choices.

When I asked to end my ride-along, Officer Brown quietly said, "Did my driving scare you?" I told him no. I told him that it really wasn't that much different than my husband's driving, and we laughed.

"So how do you do this?" I wanted to know, and I wasn't buying his pat "you have to see the humor in things" and "you can't get emotionally involved" answers.

"You lose a part of yourself," he finally said, and in the next incredibly poignant and vulnerable minutes, he shared about how he knows he's losing some of his natural emotional edge.

I was hanging onto that edge by my fingernails at this point, and it wasn't until I was halfway home and the mental fog began to lift that I realized there were tears running down my face.

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