Community Policing in Action: A Ride-Along With UAPD Sgt. Rene Hernandez

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Lo Que Pasa's Kyle Mittan[1] spent a swing shift 3 p.m. to midnight with UA Police Department Sgt. Rene Hernandez on Sept. 12. The following story came from observations and interviews during that ride-along, as well as a follow-up interview with Chief Brian Seastone.

When University of Arizona Police Department Sgt. Rene Hernandez[2] begins a shift, he's not thinking about catching people breaking the law. He's thinking about educating the community.

"Every day when I come into work, I ask myself, 'What am I trying to accomplish? Am I here to write citations just to write citations?'" he says as he drives down Second Street past the Student Union Memorial Center just after 3 p.m.

Just moments earlier, Hernandez had stopped a woman in a silver Ford Edge who failed to yield to pedestrians at the intersection of Second Street and Park Avenue, forcing a small group walking north on Park to wait on the curb. The woman, a Lyft driver, avoided a ticket but the verbal warning would hopefully remind her to be more alert during her trips through campus, Hernandez says.

"I've always been taught (to) do things for a reason? don't just write tickets to write tickets," he says. "Our officers are not out here to write tickets."

Education was the goal of nearly every interaction Hernandez had during the shift, which reflects UAPD's approach to community policing on a campus that many in the department refer to as a "city within a city."

A Small Agency With Big Influence

Hernandez's parents, who emigrated from Jalisco, Mexico, had 15 children. The youngest is Hernandez, 36, who was born in Visalia, California. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 2001-2005 during Operation Iraqi Freedom. His final duty station in Yuma brought him to Arizona, and he "just kind of stayed" in the state, he says.

He was completing general education coursework at Coconino Community College in Flagstaff in late 2005 when a detective from the Sedona Police Department came to give a guest talk. At the end, the detective asked who in the audience wanted a job, and Hernandez raised his hand.
Hernandez started at the academy in January 2006, graduated that May and joined the Sedona Police Department. Over the following seven years, he held a variety of roles, including a spot on the department's SWAT team and as an undercover detective on a narcotics task force.

That kind of expertise isn't unique within UAPD, says Chief Brian Seastone, who notes that many of the department's officers give trainings at national law enforcement conferences. Several of the department's motor officers—officers who patrol on motorcycles—train officers at other agencies. Among the detectives in the investigations unit is a former Tucson Police Department homicide investigator.

The department now has two K-9 units. Officer Kyle Morrison works with Toby, a black Labrador retriever nationally certified in explosives detection for special events such as football and basketball games. Officer Lauren Connell works with Skip, a chocolate Labrador retriever that recently received the same certification. The units assist other agencies, including TPD, the Arizona Department of Public Safety, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the Drug Enforcement Agency. Morrison and Toby have also worked national events, including the 2015 Super Bowl at State Farm Stadium—then called University of Phoenix Stadium—in Glendale.

"We're very well known for what we do," Seastone says. "For being a smaller agency, I think we're looked to in many ways as a leader in a lot of different areas."

UAPD, which was established in 1955, is the only agency in Arizona to be accredited by three law enforcement accreditation organizations, meaning the department follows best practices set by those three organizations, Seastone says.

Since 1993, the department has been accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies. It was only one of five agencies on a university campus to get the accreditation at the time.

UAPD also has been accredited since 2013 by the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators, which sets standards specific to law enforcement on college campuses. Its members include more than 1,000 colleges and universities in 11 countries.

The department's third accreditation came in September from the Arizona Association of Chiefs of Police. This accreditation specifically addresses best practices for agencies in Arizona. UAPD became the first agency in the state to receive AACOP accreditation.

4 p.m.

The Tucson sun is particularly unforgiving on this afternoon as Hernandez drives his Chevrolet Tahoe past University parking lots south of Sixth Street. In about a half hour, the city will reach its recorded high of 97 degrees. He turns the SUV down a pothole-ridden alley and parks in a small lot on the backside of the Circle K on Sixth Street directly across from Arizona Stadium.
As he walks around the front of the building, Hernandez notes his gear—his vest, belt and the assortment of tools hanging off them—adds about 40 pounds, making it important to stay hydrated on days like this one. Once inside the Circle K, he grabs a liter of water from the refrigerated section and heads to the cash register.

A daily gym-goer, Hernandez is fit, and looks the part of a former Marine who used to work SWAT and bust drug dealers. But he's not imposing thanks to an easy smile, friendly tone, and a willingness to greet just about everyone. That's especially true at this Circle K, which is clearly one of his regular stops.

"Hey, Hernandez," the cashier says with a smile before Hernandez reaches the counter. The two make small talk about video games and newsworthy incidents involving UAPD, including a streaker who ran onto the field at Arizona Stadium during the Sept. 7 home opener against Northern Arizona.

A few minutes later, he's back on the street.

4:20 p.m.

A call from dispatch takes Hernandez to a fraternity house on the north side of campus, where three other officers are already on the scene responding to a fire alarm.

Officer Melanie Sultan, the first to arrive, tells Hernandez she had just knocked on the front door and spoke with the fraternity's president, who said it was a false alarm. But since the alarm company has not relayed an all-clear message, an officer needs to confirm that there is no fire inside the house, which Sultan and other officers have explained to the student. The president, she tells Hernandez, is declining to let officers inside, citing his fraternity brothers' privacy rights.

Hernandez approaches the student and introduces himself. He explains that he and the other officers are only there to ensure the property is safe, which would require one officer entering the residence for only about a minute.

The president again explains his privacy concerns, adding that previous visits from UAPD for alarms have not required an officer to come inside.

Despite the conflicting viewpoints, the conversation remains cordial and turns toward an understanding that the fraternity's president is looking out for his residents' privacy and the police are doing their job. Since Hernandez only arrived to assist, he leaves the scene to continue his patrol, leaving the other officers to take it from there.

Back in his patrol car, Hernandez explains that there weren't many options to get inside the building after the fraternity president declined to let them in.

In these situations, when officers want to ensure people are safe but someone isn't being cooperative, "it's frustrating, but you have to try not to take it personally," he says. "We just have to tell them that we're not here to bust you, we're here to go in and make sure there's no fire."

Understanding the University Community
Hernandez worked in Sedona for seven years. When he considered his next career move, he was drawn to the idea of working for a university police department.

"That appealed to me ? that down-home type of police department," he says, explaining that working for UAPD requires more interaction with a diverse community of stakeholders. "I came here because I wanted to steer people the right way. We really try to help the student body succeed here. Wherever they end up, we want them to be productive members of society."

As a supervisor, Hernandez says he teaches his team of five officers to be proactive in engaging with the community, urging them to "be a friendly face to students, faculty and staff."

That work extends well beyond Hernandez's team. Community policing is ingrained in the department's operations, Seastone says, illustrated by the many programs UAPD is involved in across campus, including:

- Liaison officers who partner with all of the campus dorms and many of the Greek houses.
- The University's diversion program [8], which defers the criminal process for some misdemeanor citations, and the Good Samaritan Protocol [9], which says students who report classmates in need of medical help for alcohol-related incidents will not be subject to University disciplinary action under the alcohol policy. Both programs are administered in partnership with the Dean of Students Office.
- UAPD's crime prevention unit, which includes the most visible members of the department who give presentations to units across campus and at University events such as New Student Orientation.

The department also supports community causes, and last year was named among the top 10 fundraising agencies in the state for Special Olympics Arizona.

On a day-to-day basis, community policing means having all of UAPD's 120 employees act as the face of the department, Seastone says.

"You're going to see our officers not just out in patrol cars driving around, but walking around and being engaged, talking," Seastone says. Those connections, he adds, are important in making the department accessible and showing that many issues or concerns can be easily resolved.

That wasn't always a priority, Seastone says, particularly when he came to the department 39 years ago.

"We hadn't been around that long, and it was really just 'go out, do your job,'" he says. Community policing programs, he adds, took hold in the mid-1980s with an increased focus on crime prevention and efforts to proactively get information to the rest of campus.

5:30 p.m.

If there is any pattern to Hernandez's patrol route, he's the only one who knows it. He covers nearly every drivable street on campus, makes trips across Speedway to the Health Sciences campus, and even motors through the alleys off of Second Street behind bars along Speedway.
Along the way, he makes a point to wave at every fellow UAPD officer he sees.

Though the square-mile main campus is where most officers work, the department also patrols University-owned property around Tucson. Seastone notes that, under state law, all Arizona law enforcement officers can perform their duties anywhere in the state, regardless of jurisdiction.

Due to heavy traffic, Hernandez stays mostly on the outskirts of campus. But as it lets up, he works his way to one of his go-to stopping places, along James E. Rogers Way just east of Park Avenue, where he idles along the curb for a while so he can approve call reports filed by officers on his team.

As a supervisor, Hernandez is responsible for reviewing and approving the reports, ensuring officers have followed correct procedures while responding to calls. He occasionally takes questions from officers as they're filling out reports, but only gives advice.

"I don't like to micromanage," he says. He prefers to asks officers what they think the best course of action is for the situation and then guide them from there.

He clicks through the reports on the Panasonic Toughbook laptop mounted over the console of his Tahoe. Nothing noteworthy so far? a missing parking pass from a University vehicle at the University Services Annex Building; a passport that went missing weeks ago.

While stopped on James E. Rogers Way, Hernandez watches as a man driving a motorcycle north on Park veers into the bicycle lane to maneuver around a car turning left onto Second Street. Hernandez pulls out and follows.

There's a 50-50 chance of catching motorcycles, Hernandez says, since most riders know their vehicles are agile enough to outrun police cars. This motorcyclist moves into the left-turn lane on Park to head west on Speedway and stops for a red light. Hernandez pulls up on the motorcyclist's right-hand side.

He gives a friendly holler out his window: "You know you're not supposed to use the bike lane to get around people, right, brother?"

The man acknowledges his mistake and thanks Hernandez. It's another education-over-citation opportunity, Hernandez says. He waits at the red light before making a right turn on Speedway to resume his patrol.

Aspiring to Lead

Hernandez enrolled in Arizona State University's online criminal justice program while working in Sedona. He graduated, with honors, with a bachelor’s degree in 2013, shortly after arriving at UAPD.

As a first-generation college graduate, Hernandez says he's proud of the example he has set for his own kids.
"I felt pretty accomplished, being a father and husband, having a job and being a full-time student," he says about earning the degree. "It feels good to know I've started a legacy for my own kids."

He has plans to take that legacy even further. Hernandez is interested in pursuing a master's in public administration, which will give him the foundation, he hopes, to advance to leadership roles.

"Being a street cop is amazing, but I want to one day be in the upper echelons of management and potentially be a change agent," he says, "not only for this department but for law enforcement."

6:20 p.m.

As the sun goes down, the temperature drops enough for a walk around the Mall. Hernandez parks his SUV in a lot on the south side of Psychology and begins strolling toward Old Main. The Mall isn't crowded, but several groups holding events give the area a steady hum.

Hernandez makes his regular pass by the crested saguaro on the north side of Old Main and checks the olives hanging from the trees, which aren't yet ready to be picked. He passes between Berger Memorial Fountain and the building's west-side staircase and circles back toward the Mall.

On the grass just west of the Joseph Wood Krutch Garden, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese has set up tents for a get-together that includes a game of volleyball. As Hernandez walks over to say hi, the ball rolls his way. He grabs it and tosses it to Nichole Guard, a senior program coordinator in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and introduces himself.

After noticing the Spanish and Portuguese department logo on Guard's shirt, Hernandez tells her he works with other officers to improve their Spanish-speaking skills for communicating with Spanish speakers while on duty. He asks if her department might have resources to help him formalize a lesson plan, or if there might be an opportunity to partner with UAPD to take the program further. Though Hernandez's first language is Spanish, he says teaching it to others hasn't come naturally.

As the two chat, Hernandez learns Guard is from Cottonwood, 20 miles southwest of Sedona. They eventually figure out that Hernandez, during his time working undercover narcotics, used to frequent a restaurant that Guard's family owns.

The conversation circles back to teaching Spanish to officers, and Hernandez explains that he is always focused on ways to connect with other members of the community he works in.

"I think the language thing is a great place to start," Guard says, and leads Hernandez toward the tents, where the event's attendees are gathered.

She offers Hernandez a bottle of water and introduces him to assistant professor Kristin Doran, director of the Basic Language Program. By the end of their short chat, the three commit to remaining in touch about ways UAPD and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese can collaborate.
The interaction, Hernandez says, is an example of how being actively engaged as a police officer can lead to new connections and opportunities with campus colleagues that could have positive impacts across the University.

"Those types of conversations happen more often than not in our department," he says.

9:30 p.m.

After a few uneventful hours and an hourlong break for dinner ? Chipotle in the UAPD break room ? Hernandez's focus shifts to Greek houses along First Street.

University of Arizona Greek Life regularly provides to UAPD a list of houses scheduled to hold parties, on what days, and whether the parties will include alcohol since some members are 21 or older. The list isn't ironclad, Hernandez says, but it gives officers a good idea of the social events likely to be happening in Greek houses on any given day.

Tonight, parties were planned at eight houses, and police are patrolling the area to ensure that students are safe and that alcohol isn't being consumed by underage party-goers. Along First Street, pedestrian and car traffic pick up as students exit ride-sharing vehicles and file into the houses to join friends, while others congregate on yards and patios.

9:45 p.m.

Hernandez makes a right-hand turn from First onto Cherry Avenue and rolls slowly north toward Speedway as groups of students walk south toward the Greek houses. As he looks out his open window, three college-age men crossing First from the west catch Hernandez's eye. The men begin to walk faster, and one is carrying a bag.

Hernandez circles around to catch up to the group and greets them: "Evening, guys," he says. Two of the men don't acknowledge the officer and keep walking. Hernandez looks at the third and asks what's in the bag as he shifts his SUV into park and steps out.

The man, who stops as the others keep walking, says the bottles inside the bag contain "chasers" of water, lemonade and other juices. Hernandez isn't convinced and asks again.

"I'm not going to lie; they do have a little bit of alcohol," the man says.

Hernandez asks the man how old he is, then for his identification. The man, 20, is a student. After calling his information in to dispatch, Hernandez learns the student was charged two years ago as a minor in possession and has gone through a diversion program, meaning he isn't eligible for it again.

Hernandez tells the student that he appreciates his honesty, then asks if he'd be willing to pour out the alcohol to avoid a citation. The student immediately agrees.

As he empties the bottles next to a dumpster, the two make small talk, and Hernandez teases the student about his friends leaving him behind to talk to a cop.

"I appreciate you being honest with me," Hernandez says again as he sends the student on his way. "Have a safe night."

The fact that the student wasn't eligible for diversion, Hernandez says, factored into his
decision to release him without a citation.

"If we don't have to jam people up, we don't jam people up," he adds. "The goal is don't let alcohol into the parties and keep people safe."

10:45 p.m.

For his last call of the night, Hernandez is asked to supervise a traffic stop south of campus near 12th Street and Campbell Avenue, where another officer has pulled over a man suspected of driving under the influence of alcohol.

Hernandez and the first officer on scene administer a series of tests that examine the man's eye movement and his ability to walk in a straight line and to stand on one foot. The man has trouble moving only his eyes without turning his head, as instructed during the first test. He also has trouble balancing but stays on his feet.

As the first officer continues with the remainder of the tests, Hernandez leaves and heads back to campus. He makes a few more passes by the Greek houses on First but doesn't stop.

11 p.m.

Hernandez makes the short drive back to UAPD to finish the night with about an hour of paperwork. As he pulls into the gated lot and parks his SUV, he hears over the radio that the man stopped on suspicion of driving while intoxicated has been arrested.

Working in law enforcement, regardless of the jurisdiction, will always be about public safety.

But for UAPD officers, whose jurisdiction encompasses a community built around learning, it's also about education and connection. And that happens through intentional and positive interactions with students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni and countless others who visit campus.

That might sound like a tall order. Hernandez sees it as an opportunity.

"In policing, one thing that we get mixed up a lot is that we think people should adapt to us and the way we do things. I think we should be adapting to the community," he says. "It's up to us to figure out what people here are trying to accomplish and to be a resource to help them do that."

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Links
[1] https://uanews.arizona.edu/contact-us
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