UAPD Officer Honored as 'Unsung Hero'

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How many former Marines do you know who have a special spot for Grumpy Cat in their workspaces?

Well, here’s one: David Caballero, a lieutenant with the University of Arizona Police Department who recently was honored with the 2018 Unsung Heroes award, given by the Southern Arizona Law Enforcement Foundation. The award recognizes law enforcement professionals for going above and beyond in their service to the community— all in their spare time and without receiving compensation.

A printout that's taped to Caballero's file cabinet offers, among other good advice, a reminder that "people are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway."

For Caballero, those words are central to what he does.

"I always try to see the good in people," he says, "because that's what helps me get through the crappy stuff."

Most people would probably agree that that's easier said than done. But Caballero, with two decades of service in the military and 15 years in law enforcement, leaves no doubt that he lives by those words, every day. It sounds cliché, but he is a man who embodies what it means to devote not only his professional career but also his personal time to help others succeed.

"I learned a great deal about leadership in the military," he says. "In my current position here at UAPD, I would say I spend most of my time keeping my officers focused on the job, and not on stuff that makes them unhappy. If they need something, it's my job to get it to them. And if they need something from the chief, it's my job to do that. The way I see it is, I work for them, not the other way around."

UAPD Assistant Chief Robert Sommerfeld, who nominated Caballero, says: "When I saw the award announcement and the nomination criteria, David was the first and only person that came to my mind, and that's because what he does encompasses so many areas? specifically his work to help youth, our military members and veterans, and our fellow public safety officials."

In his role as judge advocate, Caballero volunteers for the Marine Corps League Detachment 007 in Tucson, an organization that provides support to veterans of the U.S. Marine Corps. He was instrumental in revitalizing the program and boosting membership to more than 600, making the detachment the largest chapter in the state.

He also presides over the Arizona Conference of Police and Sheriffs, or AZCOPS, as well as its UAPD affiliate. AZCOPS supports law enforcement officers, dispatchers and police aides...
One program that is especially close to Caballero's heart is the Devil Pups Program, a youth life skills and leadership program coordinated by the Marine Corps. In 2002, when he retired from the corps, he took the program over as the head liaison representative of the Tucson chapter, with the goal of transforming it from a type of "boot camp where the kids got yelled at a lot" to a program with a more "substantive lesson."

Over 11 Saturdays, teenagers in the program participate in life skills and character-building activities. At the end, 20 are selected to spend 10 days at the Marine Corps' Camp Pendleton in California to learn how to, Caballero says, "be a better version of themselves."

"We prepare them for life," he says, "and one of our main objectives is to teach them how to deal with failure and adversity — both inevitable parts of their lives.

"They learn discipline, leadership and a renewed respect for their parents. They leave Camp Pendleton with a greater appreciation for the country they live in, and an appreciation for the freedoms they enjoy."

A self-described "bad student," Caballero says he struggled with the geography of the University campus when he first joined UAPD.

"Unlike in the city, where you have blocks and intersections, campus has all those dead-end streets, convoluted passages and buildings that are all different," he laughs. "Once I started attending the police academy, I became a student: On the weekends, I got on my bike and rode around campus."

One aspect of working for a university police department that he particularly likes is a lighter call load.

"It allows us to spend time with the people who call. We're going to be able to sit down with you and give you quality service. It doesn't end with the officer taking a report and leaving. We get the opportunity to work our case from start to finish."

Variety is a boon, too, he says, explaining that he might be asked to help with student, and then get a call "where I get to talk with a professor about an issue that's been going on in their class. You just never know what is going to come up."

Before he was selected for received the Unsung Heroes award, Caballero didn't even know it existed.

"I'm a bit humbled," he says. "I don't fare very well with recognition, and I'm not comfortable with it, because that's not what I do. What I enjoy is setting up my officers for success."

"David definitely steps up and always takes the staff's well-being into primary consideration," says UAPD Chief Brian Seastone. "He takes many unselfish actions that help others and puts the weight on his shoulders to ensure that things get done properly."

On Jan. 27, Caballero was presented with the award at a reception, with his wife and children among those congratulating him.

"I remember my wife saying, 'You are taking me places!' he said. " Until we got there, I kept
thinking to myself, 'What's the big deal?' But you know what, it was a big deal. It made me realize how much patience she has with me neglecting my honey-do list at home in favor of all this stuff I do off duty. That really means a lot to me.”

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