

ALONG FOR THE RIDE

*Cruising with the cops is
an eye-opening experience*

By Michael A. Stusser

Illustration by Ken Susynski

First, a guilty plea: I like cops; always have. As a kid playing cops and robbers, I was always the fuzz. I watched *Adam-12* and looked up to noble Pete Malloy, and wanted to ride a big-ass cycle like Erik Estrada on *CHiPs*. During Seattle's World Trade Organization (WTO) protests, except for the pig who kicked one protester in the balls and some willy-nilly macing, I actually think the Seattle Police Department (SPD) showed incredible restraint.

Police in our fair city have had their share of controversy. From the WTO in 2001 to the possible improper exoneration of several officers by the chief, the image of the boys and girls in blue has been battered. And cops themselves have attended more than their fair share of funerals for officers slain in the line of duty.

Citizen Observer Rides allow regular folk to cruise in a squad car for a four-hour shift and encounter what police deal with every day: the slew of wife-beaters, jaywalkers, thieves and law-abiding citizens who

can't figure out how to turn off their own car alarms. Reality without the TV, it's *America's Most Wanted* meets *Survivor*.

Let's ride: An officer tells me to fill out a Citizen Observer Form, to check my criminal record and basically sign my life away. Observers have a choice of the day (Friday and Saturday nights are too dangerous) and three shifts. Figuring it will give crooks the most time to get hammered, I choose the late shift—though I expect a lot of "I've fallen and I can't get up" 911 calls.





RIDE 1: SOUTHWEST PRECINCT, WEDNESDAY-NIGHT SHIFT

Driving to the Southwest Precinct is scary as hell—people stumbling in the road and selling dime bags streetside. No wonder they put a police station down here.

I empty my pockets of contraband: rolling papers, joints, hemp wallet and American Civil Liberties Union card. I'd hate to wind up with a K-9 unit humping my leg.

I look over a recruitment poster: minimum age of 20, high school diploma or GED,

no felony convictions, excellent driving record (I'm out) and good character. There are probably two types who would dig this gig: control freaks who want to legally beat the crap out of delinquents, and community-minded men and women with a desire to protect and serve.

I finally hear someone in back say, "Does anybody want this guy?" and several groans. The door swings open.

"Michael? Officer Chang. Lemme give you

a tour of the precinct and we'll hit the road."

Patrick Chang has been on the force 26 years, the last 22 as a police officer. Six feet tall and solid. His flattop may be graying, but he'll kick your ass if he has to.

8:10 P.M.

The parking lot looks like a Budget lot at the airport, except every car is full-size, with gun racks and the special ramming package.

"You're not armed, is that correct?" asks Chang. (Wisely, weapons aren't allowed on ride-

alongs, as police don't want observers popping off a few rounds of vigilante justice.)

"No, sir," I respond, sounding like Eddie Haskell on *Leave It to Beaver*. While Chang loads his equipment into the squad car, I kick the tires and try to make small talk.

The backseat is made of hard black plastic, a new feature making it easier to clean up puke and impossible to shove objects under cushions. Automakers of family vans and station wagons should take note.

Chang's thorough as hell, checking the car for contraband suspects may have ditched, inspecting the undercarriage, checking his lights, wiping down the on-board computer screen and filling the car with gas. I'm told to ride shotgun. Buckle up, buttercup.

As we pull out of the station, the dispatcher calls out a domestic disturbance. "Can I turn on the flashing lights?" (I have to ask.) Chang explains that it's actually better without the blue-and-red lights, as citizens react poorly—panicking, swerving or pulling to the left. Well, what fun is it if ya can't flash the cop lights!

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8:39 P.M.

Domestic disputes make up a large percentage of calls. This one involves two blue-hairs in their late 70s. A female officer arrives. I'm asked to stay outside until they secure things, and in a minute Chang waves me in.

"Who he?" slurs an elderly man named Robert*. (*Names have been changed to protect the innocent. I've always wanted to write that.)

The other officer has taken Robert's wife, Betty, into the bedroom to get her side. Robert demands to know which neighbor narked, and Chang tries to sort out what happened. He has to ask Robert at least a dozen times to sit on a leather lounge.

"I know you don't like us here, sir, but while we're inside, we're kinda in charge, OK?"

"We push each other a little, that's all." He's

hammered. "Argument between couple. That all."

"Do you think it's a good idea not to drink anymore tonight?" Chang suggests. The man agrees, saying it's nice of us to have come. "Trouble in USA is divorce," he slurs. "Not so in China. I come in 1947. Chinese custom is different. You not understand." Chang, of Chinese descent, understands full well.

Betty wanted to take a walk when her husband blocked the door. More embarrassed than anything, she does not wish to press charges.

"Argue, OK," Chang reiterates, "but don't touch each other. If she wants to leave, you let her; she just wants to cool off. Ma'am, you can call 911 if there're any more problems and we'll come back, all right?"

Back in the car, Chang runs a background check just in case the old man has a history of violence. Unbeknownst to me, he'd searched the recliner for weapons and seated Robert away from kitchen knives.

Chang tells me about the mentoring he does in his spare time: He took one youth to the hospital after he downed 50 Tylenols. He also mentored a brother and sister who watched their father shoot their mom at the dinner table, then turn the gun on himself. Chang went to counseling sessions with them in his off time. And I can't find time to do my laundry.

9:55 P.M.

Dispatch: Someone has taken down a stop sign at the West Seattle Junction. Drunken males seen loitering in the area. Chang thinks he knows the punks who did it and where

they hang out. Roger that, we're on our way.

Giant possum alert! We screech to a halt. Suspect is about 2 feet long, four-armed and dangerous.

We arrive in the parking lot and see the stop sign lying in a parking lot. A guy on a cell phone runs into an apartment.

"Yep, that's Frank's place." Chang shines the spot on the front door and it slams shut.

We look inside. A chubby teenager lies comatose on the couch and Chang bangs on the window. "Open the door, please." He shines his flashlight right on Doughboy's face, but he stares straight ahead. Suddenly, the other man appears from behind the door. His fists are clenched and he's grinding his teeth. Doughboy is still comatose on the couch, maybe dead. The blinds *slam* shut.

"Gonna need some backup here," Chang

says into his radio. Then he gives me the detail I could have done without: The apartment is rented by an ex-con who did time for murder.

Two backup units arrive. The blind opens a peep. My adrenaline is racing as we hear the idiots barricading themselves in.

Another squad car pulls up and an officer hollers, "Hey! That's the guy who head-butted [Officer] Miller last week!" They race around the side of the building as someone tries to get out. Chang seems mellow; the new cops on the scene do not, suggesting we pump mace into the open window.

The suspects are growing more agitated—smashing objects and continuing to barricade, and no one's really sure if this is a burglary in progress, a meth lab or if Frank—the killer—is even inside.

Chang gives the ultimate ultimatum: "You're going to have to come out of there. If we come inside, you will go downtown." He has a serene look on his face, sort of like a father whose teenager is out beyond curfew and hopes everything will turn out all right.

Chang gives me the lowdown: They can't get hold of Frank, who rents the apartment and did time for a murder-2 conviction in 1974. They think the guy on the cell phone is a teen named Terry. We're waiting for the apartment manager to come unlock the door, then we'll bust through. *We'll?*

Doughboy is lying on the floor, out. Terry is running around like a chicken with its head cut off, ducking into the bathroom and flushing things down the toilet, hiding in the closet, putting a towel around his head (expecting tear gas, perhaps) and generally gettin' freaky with it.

"He's probably been smoking sherm [marijuana cigs rolled in embalming fluid]," says one officer. "He's all fired up."

The K-9 unit arrives. Nice puppy. The German shepherd jumps at the window and howls like a bear. "Usually we just put the dog at the door and they give up."

Homicide. Sherm. Dogs. Mace. I want my mommy.

It seems like a bad omen that the officers have put on black gloves. Five or six officers smash open the door. I'm kinda right behind 'em, and wait till someone yells, "Suspects secured!"

The place is trashed: beer cans and stereo equipment strewn on the floor, couches and cabinets from the barricade upside down. So are the suspects, bandana-headed Doughboy, alive after all but really messed up, and Terry, who looks much younger in cuffs, defiant but not struggling.

"Why didn't you just come out when we asked you to?" he's asked while being yanked to his feet. "I was told not to make any commentators," he says, "till my rights are read."

They read 'em out loud and clear, and I'm in

TV land again. They'll be charged with obstructing justice and have no idea how close they came to getting their heads blown off.

I feel like I've had 10 triple espressos. Chang, cool as a cucumber, muses as we drive: "Had they just opened the door when I asked, I would have told them they couldn't be in Frank's apartment and that would have been the end of the story. But act all crazy and ..."

Turns out Doughboy is 17 and Terry is 16. Kids, with substance-abuse problems and a lousy future.

1:35 A.M.

Chang and I shake hands. I'm fatigued with the kind of exhaustion you get after cramming for finals, coming down with the flu or maybe having a baby.

While my four-hour shift is up, Chang is heading back to the street, protecting and serving until 4:30 a.m.

RIDE 2: WEST PRECINCT, THURSDAY-NIGHT SHIFT

After roll call I am assigned to veteran officer Daniel Amador. (It's obvious the SPD won't be sending citizens out with rogue rookie cops who might tarnish its image.) Amador is professional and looks more like a lawyer than a policeman.

The cold months are slow: The weather drives transient populations indoors, drunken tourists have yet to arrive and even criminals enjoy cuddling up by a fire. Slow nights give riders a chance to chat with officers about everything from failed monorails to the *giant* chip on many cops' shoulders. Amador's main beef is that, aside from saving the occasional citizen via CPR, the best an officer can hope for is an entire career where absolutely nothing goes wrong—no accidental shootings, no citizen lawsuits, no mistakes on a report form letting Ted Bundy go free. Perceived by some as a necessary evil, the system is set up for cops to fail. An inordinate percentage of African-American men fill cells across the land. Does that mean the force is racist, ponders Amador, or is it a reflection of a bigger communal mess? It's an ugly job, and someone's got to do it—in this case, for \$34 an hour for a long-term officer like Amador. Pay was a sore point in a contract fight with the city.

Amador gives me quite the mind-bender. Say you've got a hipster couple at Victor Steinbrueck Park having a picnic at sunset with a bottle of wine. Do you bust them for an open container and ruin their evening? Probably just a warning, he says. What if it's a transient or mentally ill person who has been known to act up and cause some trouble? Amador suggests it would be wise to tag him with a violation, knowing he won't show up to contest (or pay) the ticket, and thus getting this potentially violent person in the

system. The next time an officer sees the man causing trouble—or off his meds—he can grab him off the street for the outstanding warrant. Unfair? Perhaps. Good working practice that may save a life down the road? Perhaps.

9:45 P.M.

Cops and doughnuts! Amador takes a coffee break and meets with fellow officers at Ralph's Grocery and Deli downtown. I'm the only one who actually has a doughnut, as the officers are eating their dinners and getting jacked up on caffeine. Shop talk ensues—the precincts seem chopped up, salaries suck, the City Council is out to get them, why don't biker cops get reprimanded when they violate uniform standards? The officers ask me what I'm doing and are unimpressed with my answer.

"Want to know the only time you'll see someone fight an officer?" Amador asks as two women run in front of us. "Try and give a yuppie a jaywalking ticket. Tell a con to put his hands on the hood, they go right into the position, but these people will get right in your face."

It's almost midnight before our number is called—a woman named Kelly has been struck in the head and there is blood everywhere. She's screaming that someone stabbed her in an apartment and stole her wallet. The blood oozes from her bandaged head and I'm queasy (as usual). A chick who looks like a man hit her with a bat, then a knife, then a gun, she says. Kelly claims she has to get on a plane to meet her boyfriend—the quarterback of the team in San Francisco. "The 49ers?" Amador asks in amazement, as she continues to spin an incoherent story. Amador recognizes her from an incident in Pioneer Square in which she also claimed to have had her wallet stolen. We check three or four apartment numbers Kelly mentioned, but nothing checks out. Probably hit with a bottle over drugs by another transient. I think about how hard Kelly's life has been, and how very lucky I am.

RIDE 3: EAST PRECINCT, SUNDAY-NIGHT SHIFT

Officer Wade Murray is what you want in a cop: congenial, tough, no-nonsense and a bit of a redneck. Crew cut, clip-on tie and dip in place, he understands he's the enforcement arm of a wishy-washy and convoluted system of searches, seizures, juries and crack addicts—all right here in good ol' Seattle.

After roll call (7:30 p.m.), Murray walks me through the precinct bullpen—10 cops are watching the end of the Giants-Packers game before heading out. There's a pool table in the center of the room, and above it a Wall for the Fallen—photos of 100 officers who have been killed in the line of duty. Murray's got a bullet-proof vest under his uniform for a reason. The question is, where's mine?

The East Precinct covers Capitol Hill down to the International District. There are about a dozen other patrol cars roaming the sector, and we occasionally pass them with nary a wave. Whereas officers used to have partners, today most ride solo, expanding the territory.

Murray's been married three times in his 34 years, his longest-term relationship being with the force, where he's going on his 10th year. Country music is our sidekick as we round the corner of 14th and Cherry, where several men walk in zombie trances. Crack is a big problem in the area—dealers make big money, and if they're busted they get only two or three days in the clink for a conviction.

Suddenly, a Toyota blows through a red light. The lights and siren go on. The woman's car reeks of marijuana. "It's my brother's car. He's had it for the last six months and smokes all the time." A search of the car turns up no drugs. "Because you had to sit on my bumper in the freezing cold, I'm letting you off with a warning for that red light," Murray says. "Have a good night."

He looks at me. "I'm not a real ticket writer. Discretion's key in this job." I ask about the citizens initiative that made marijuana possession a low priority. "It was already a low priority," says Murray. "We've got lots more serious stuff to be worried about." I like his answer.

Murray and I grab a meal at Burger King and discuss the presidential election—let's just say he's more "law and order" than I am, but I like his open-mindedness. Our chat is interrupted by dispatch: man tied up and robbed at gunpoint. Murray screeches out of the parking garage. "Don't worry," he says. "I haven't killed anybody yet." Even with the lights and siren blaring, 80 mph is dangerous stuff, as not every citizen comes to a stop at intersections. At the scene, two officers are leading a hysterical naked man to a car, crying about how the intruders put a gun to his head. "Just duck if anyone comes out," smirks Murray, who goes in search of bad guys. After 20 minutes, I'm moved from the line of fire to a captain's car further back. I'm still nauseated from the ride (and the hamburger).

An hour later officers bust into the house, but the robbers are long gone. Murray returns, frozen solid and nonchalant. "It's possible the guy—who was renting—owed money to drug dealers and let them come 'rob' the place." Talk about suspicious.

It's 1 in the morning and, while Murray may have three more hours on his shift, I've had enough crack dens, Dumpster divers, drunks and armed robberies. "I can't believe you picked a Sunday to do a ride-along," Murray says, dropping me off at my car. "There's nothing happening on a Sunday."

Protecting and serving—and, in my opinion, doing it as well as can be expected. But don't take my word for it. Ride along. **L&P**