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Women in Uniform

A unique Vermont program helps females join the force

by Cathy Resmer (11/09/05).

Working in law enforcement isn't just a job; it's a calling. But answering the call is far from easy, especially for women. Paula Teague figured out she wanted to be a cop this fall, while working on a career-planning exercise with her teenage daughter. The fit, no-nonsense 34-year-old, who lives in Underhill, kept pushing her daughter toward policing. "I was really encouraging her to look at it further," she recalls, "and I realized that it was probably because I was so interested."

But Teague didn't know how to start pursuing a law-enforcement career. The jobs are definitely out there -- police departments across Vermont list an abundance of openings. Some departments, like the one at the University of Vermont, are painfully short-staffed, their vacancies exacerbated by the deployment of officers overseas with the Vermont National Guard.

Job postings for law-enforcement positions almost always include the phrase, "women encouraged to apply." Still, for a woman with no prior experience in the field -- Teague boards horses, and has waitressed and sold cars -- the demanding application process and the male-dominated law-enforcement culture can be intimidating.

So it's worth noting that last week, Teague passed the entrance exam for the Criminal Justice Training Academy in Pittsford. She still has to find a police department to hire her and pay for her training before she can enter the 16-week academy, but right now, her chances of becoming a cop look pretty good -- thanks in part to an innovative program called Step Up to Policing for Women.



AMANDA MCRAE WORKS ON HER ABS

PHOTO:MATTHEW THORSEN

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Teague might still be trying to sort out her options if she hadn't seen an ad for Step Up in September. The nine-week course is run by the Northern New England Tradeswomen and funded through job-training grants from the Vermont Department of Labor. It allows aspiring female officers to meet and learn from police and corrections professionals, and helps prepare students mentally, physically and emotionally for the challenges they'll face in the application process and on the job.

Teague was accepted to the program's second session, which began October 12. She took the test on October 31. Teague claims Step Up is the reason she's been able to go this far, this quickly. "This program has really clarified everything for me," she says. "It really helps you with the process."

It's a sentiment echoed by Step Up graduate Kim Conant, now a part-time officer in Shelburne. She used to work at Hertz Rent A Car. "If it hadn't been for the class," she says, "I would probably still be at Hertz."

Why do women need their own special policing program? Because law-enforcement agencies across the country still receive far fewer applications from women than from men, and frustrated recruiters want that situation to change.

Many women officers still say law enforcement is primarily a man's world, and it pretty much is. According to the National Center for Women and Policing, in 2001 women accounted for just 12.7 percent of all officers in large police departments, and 26.3 percent of corrections officers. In Vermont the number of women in corrections is slightly higher -- just over 35 percent -- but the proportion of women in policing is probably lower. No official statewide statistics are available, but nationally, women make up just 8 percent of the force in smaller departments. Of Vermont's 309 state troopers, only 22, or 7 percent, are female.

Chief Thomas Tremblay of the Burlington Police Department says hiring more women is definitely a priority for him. Women account for just 11 of the department's 98 officers. "It's important for the police department to be a reflection of the community it serves," he says.

And Tremblay points out that finding interested, qualified women is particularly important now. The chief says it's been difficult to recruit anyone into policing for the past 10 years, and the shortages today are more acute because of the war. Six state troopers and more than 30 of the state's 1200 corrections officers are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, as are an unknown number of Vermont police officers; an officer from Wilmington was killed in Iraq in September.

Tremblay believes there are women out there -- such as Teague -- who could fill the gaps and make good cops. He just hasn't been able to reach them yet.

Gary Margolis, head of Police Services at the University of Vermont, has been puzzling over the same problem. His 22-officer department, the sixth-largest in the state, is short five officers, and another is serving in Iraq. Just two of UVM's officers are women.

Two years ago, Margolis hired a marketing firm to help the school increase diversity on its force. He and the consultants searched "far and wide" for a program that would not only identify women interested in policing, but also would help them break into the field. They couldn't find one anywhere, Margolis says.

The consultants then recommended that he approach Northern New England Tradeswomen. Since 1985, NNET has been running a Step Up pre-apprenticeship program for women in the building trades. Eighty-five percent of their graduates have found jobs.

Margolis met with representatives from NNET in the spring of 2004. "Next thing you know, *boom*," he says. "They came back a month and a half later and said they had funding."



Tuomey has been pushed down stairs, thrown through a plate glass window, shot at and had axes thrown at her. "If you don't think you can ever shoot someone," she suggests, "maybe you might want to reconsider going into this line of work."

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by Ken Picard (10/12/05)...

The nonprofit accepted the challenge because it fits their mission of finding good-paying jobs for women in nontraditional fields, says NNET Executive Director Jayne Sheridan. "It's hard in Vermont to find employment that pays a livable wage without a lot of training and education," she notes. "Police and corrections departments can provide the training. You've just got to get in."

So far, Step Up to Policing for Women has done a decent job of getting women in the door. The program enrolled 11 students last fall and 10 of them graduated. Of those, five are now sworn officers -- four in corrections and one with the Shelburne Police Department. Others have found jobs at security firms.

Step Up's current class has 10 students, including Teague. They drive to Burlington, from as far as Barre and Enosburg, to attend classes from 9 to 4:30, Monday through Thursday. The Vermont Department of Labor pays their tuition, and some women get help with daycare and travel expenses from the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation.

Step Up assists women in a variety of ways. In addition to occasional field trips to a ropes course and the police academy, they get visits from outside presenters. Step Up works with eight different Vermont policing agencies, all of which send officers to give talks on topics such as "An Overview of Rank & Structure" and "Role of Probation Officers." The women also complete mock academy entrance exams, create and polish resumes, practice public speaking and interviewing skills and, perhaps most importantly, spend an hour and a half each day working out with a personal trainer at the Burlington YMCA. This last piece is key, since the physical training requirement is one of the biggest barriers to women who want to enter the field.

On a recent Tuesday morning, the Step Up students were stretching and sweating in their quest to make the grade. Trainer Becky Tharp says they spend each day doing both cardio workouts and weight training on the Nautilus machines; requirements for the under-30 applicants include being able to do 32 sit-ups and 15 push-ups, and bench press 59 percent of their weight. The 30- to 39-year-old requirements are slightly less stringent. Two days a week, all the women practice running; regardless of age, they're required to complete a mile and a half in about 15 minutes.

On this morning, 27-year-old Mandy Wooster is completing a mock test. The academy exam is given every three weeks, and she hopes to take it November 21. A sturdy woman with a resolute gaze, Wooster lives in Fletcher with her husband and two daughters. She's a Coast Guard vet; she enlisted at 17 and served for four years, which explains her Coast Guard T-shirt and athletic shorts. She had a job doing quality control at Husky, but was recently laid off.

Wooster misses the pride she took in her military work, she says. "I want to get that back . . . And I want to be an outstanding role model for my girls." This morning, she's able to meet the academy's flexibility requirement, but can't quite reach the bench-press benchmark. "I was close," she says.

Meanwhile, three of her classmates are stretching on blue plastic mats outside the racquetball court, doing the push-up and sit-up "improvement plans," which Tharp calls "grueling."

"I can do 20, 25 of the girly pushups," boasts Step Up student Julia White, "but the other ones, not so many." As Andrea Brett gets into the push-up position, she asks White what else they're supposed to do. White reads from the paper describing the workout. "It says 'pec routine until your arm has muscle failure,'" she reads. "So, you know when you fall on your face, you're done."

At 10:15, the women drag their mats into the racquetball court for cool-down. As they stretch, someone asks Tharp, who is eight months pregnant, when she's due. When Tharp responds, most of her classmates nod or say they know how she feels; nine of the 10 students have kids. Many are single moms.

After their workout, the women walk across the street to the Fletcher Free Library. They spend the rest of the

day upstairs in the Pickering Room. Two tables have been pushed together to create a large workspace. Boxes of pens and pencils sit in the center, along with an academy test-prep book.

Program coordinator Kristen Mullins sits at the head of the table. She has written out the day's schedule on large white sheets of paper affixed to the wall. First on the agenda is an update from Teague, who took the academy exam the day earlier. She skipped the morning's physical training session, but news that she'd passed had already circulated. Her classmates congratulate her vigorously when she shows up at the library, and listen intently as she relates her experience.

As Teague talks, Mullins writes notes in blue marker on another sheet of paper on the wall, titled "Things We're Learning." Teague recommends, for example, that the women pack a lunch to eat after they complete the physical portion of the test. Under "hydrate prior to exam," and "know to keep your own pace during run," Mullins writes, "bring food."

Such tips might get passed between friends, but many of these women don't know anyone else who's been through the academy. Hearing a firsthand account from a peer bolsters their confidence and makes them feel less like outsiders.

When Teague finishes, Mullins asks the women if they've been able to schedule ride-alongs. She encourages the women to spend time on the job with officers, to see what their days are really like.

Wooster, who had originally planned to pursue policing, reports on her experience shadowing "a buddy," who's a Field Supervisory Unit officer in the Department of Corrections. She accompanied him on his rounds in Burlington. They visited some of his parolees, checking to make sure they were following their restrictions. Wooster was impressed with the way her friend cheered on a guy who seemed to be doing well. "It was just amazing," she says, "the role that he plays in people's lives, and in the community. It was really good to see the impact he has."

She had a somewhat less positive impression of the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility, where her friend works. She reports being a little uncomfortable getting so close to the inmates, but her friend reminded her, "Nobody's more than five seconds away from you," she says.

Overall, Wooster's tour was "an eye-opener," she reports. She's now considering a job in corrections. It's a popular conclusion -- corrections officers spend only five weeks at the academy, a more manageable commitment for people with kids. Some of Wooster's classmates and some Step Up graduates also consider it an entree to a career in policing.

When she finishes, Mullins reminds the women, "Don't take a job in a correctional facility unless you've toured it." It's good advice. According to a May 2005 Department of Corrections study, turnover and job dissatisfaction in Vermont prisons is alarmingly high. The Step Up program is designed to encourage the women to seriously consider the sort of work they want, so that once they pass the academy exam, they don't end up taking the first job they're offered. "You should be asking, 'What makes sense for *my* goals?'" Mullins says.

Captain Lianne Tuomey, of the UVM police, offers similar advice when she speaks to the group later that afternoon. The hawk-nosed 24-year police veteran radiates confidence when she strides into the library in her uniform. When she retired from the Burlington Police Department in 1999 to join UVM, she was the most highly decorated and highest-ranking female officer in the state.

In a presentation on policing as service to the community, Tuomey urges the women to find the right fit for them. "There is no cookie-cutter approach to being a police officer," she says. She essentially advises the women not to try to be just like men. "Women bring to policing a different perspective that enhances all policing," she says. "Don't surrender that to fit in. You have to be really true to yourself."

Still, Tuomey warns that they have to prepare themselves for the worst. Tuomey has been pushed down stairs, thrown through a plate glass window, shot at and had axes thrown at her, she reports. "If you don't think you can ever shoot someone," she suggests, "maybe you might want to reconsider going into this line of work."

That admonition might give some people pause, but it has the opposite effect on Alyssa Graves. The 25-year-old single mom in the pink hoodie has wanted to be a cop since the third grade, when she saw the movie *Feds*. "It doesn't scare me," she says, after Tuomey's presentation. "It's exciting, actually."

She's exactly the sort of woman Tuomey is trying to reach when she insists the journey to a policing career is difficult, but possible. When things get hard, she says, "you get up one more time, you *push* one more time . . . You *are* the next generation of law enforcement."

Tuomey's experience in law enforcement doesn't necessarily translate to the rest of Vermont. She's worked her entire career in the state's largest city. Most of Vermont's law-enforcement agencies are small and rural, and not all of them are as welcoming to women.

Sergeant Laurie Krupp, of the Brandon Police Department, says she's been sexually harassed on the job. Now 43, she entered the police academy after graduating from high school. She worked for the Rutland County Sheriff's Department for five years, and has been in Brandon -- population nearly 4000 -- for 16. She won't be addressing the Step Up program, but is happy to share her thoughts on women in policing.

Krupp has always been the only woman officer in her department, and that hasn't been a good thing, she says. In 2002, she sued the Brandon Police Department, two fellow officers and the town of Brandon over nine counts of "inappropriate sexual behavior."

In a 2004 interview with *Seven Days*, Krupp claimed that her chief "pretended to masturbate in front of me and my [female] secretary and thought it was funny

. . . He would expose his penis to us all the time. He would take off all his clothes, take off his underwear, roll them in a ball and throw them at your head while you were typing on your computer or talking on the phone."

Both of the accused officers and the town of Brandon denied Krupp's allegations. The suit was settled out of court in 2003. Krupp received an undisclosed payment and was promoted to detective. All the officers in the department left shortly afterwards; a few have taken jobs at other police departments in Vermont.

Krupp says she doesn't regret becoming a cop and loves her job, but she wouldn't recommend this career to other women. "It's still considered a man's job," she says. "Unless you can toughen up and stand your ground, you're going to get eaten up and spit out."

By contrast, the Hinesburg Community Police Department is more female-friendly. The town of 5000 has seven police officers, three of them women. That's 42 percent, likely the highest in the state.

Chief Chris Morrell personally invited the first woman officer, Barbara Brisson, to join the force shortly after he arrived 10 years ago. Brisson, 44, started her career as a part-time animal-control officer for Hinesburg and the surrounding towns. Now she divides her work for the department between being an administrative assistant and serving as a K-9 cop, patrolling the back roads with her German Shepherd, "Tiger."

All the women on Hinesburg's force are part-time officers. The away-from-home academy-training requirement for part-time uniformed work is much shorter than for full-time positions. That, and the flexibility of part-time, makes it the more attractive option for many women, Morrell claims. Brisson says patrolling part-time works well for her.

At 5-foot-2, she's small in stature, but Brisson isn't afraid to confront suspects on a lonely dirt road, and she

seems comfortable with the gun on her hip. She says the only people who have ever harassed her on the job are the ones she's locked up.

Brisson's biggest complaint is that her pants don't fit right; the uniform companies haven't caught up with the force's changing demographics, she says. "Compared to a man, who could choose from 35 different styles, I could choose from six."

Lisa Primo credits Brisson for being "a trailblazer." At 25, Primo is Hinesburg's youngest officer. She says her entire department is "like family," but insists that the larger world of law-enforcement is still "a boy's club."

"If things are easier here," Primo says, "it's probably because of Barb."

Everyone seems to agree that bringing more women into the field is what changes the culture, and Burlington Police Chief Tremblay is optimistic that the Step Up program will help him do that. He didn't receive any applications from the program last year, but he's hopeful they'll get someone this time around. Paula Teague is applying to Burlington, though, like a good Step Up student, she's applying elsewhere, as well.

"From my perspective, it's great," Tremblay says of Step Up. "Other than to just say we want to hire more women, it's a program where we can actually make a difference. I absolutely would like to see it continue."

But the program's future is by no means secure. The grant NNET used to fund Step Up to Policing is meant to help *establish* job-training ventures, not to sustain them. Step Up to Policing is, in fact, a two-year pilot program. For a third class to convene next fall, NNET will have to find another source of funding.

"We're committed to offering it again, as are our police partners," says NNET Director Jayne Sheridan. "There's a really good chance it's going to happen again."

The best argument for its continuation comes from Paula Teague, who, if all goes well, will be entering the police academy in January. "I never would have figured a month and a half ago," she says, "that I would be here."

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