

Police academy builds partnerships

By Christina Chapman

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MORRIS - The 11 graduates of the Morris Police Department's Citizen's Police Academy may not be police officers, but they are fully equipped to do community policing.

"This is all about building partnerships in the community," said Chief Brent Dite on May 20 at the graduation at Maria's restaurant in Morris.

"The community is so important to us. Like I said the first night of class, if we didn't have the support of our community, we would fail. The community and police work together to problem-solve."

All 11 members of the 16th class of the Morris Citizen's Police Academy received certificates of completion and heard comments from Dite; Detective Sgt. Scott Henderson, who runs the program; and the department's chaplain, Steve Larson.

Dite said he hopes the graduates realize they are the eyes and ears of the police department - as well as gain a better understanding of a police officer's job. He said that as alumni of the academy the graduates are better equipped to keep track of suspicious activity and people and understand that the police cannot see everything and need to be informed by the public.

On a regular shift, Morris police have about four to five officers patrolling 70 miles of streets in the city, and they cannot be everywhere all the time.

"If you guys aren't a big part of what we do, we're not doing our job," Dite said.

Graduates' response

Depending on their life experiences, the graduates had different reactions to what was taught in the class and what may have been a surprising fact.

Gail and Dennis Ferrantino are new residents of Morris and enrolled in the academy to get to know more about the police and community.

"I'm surprised with what these guys have to go through," Gail said. "What they do is amazing to me."

Gail said she appreciated the use-of-force class given by Henderson. She said she didn't realize officers are trained to only use as much force as needed and have to consider the gender, strength and mental capacity of the offender before handling him or her.

Ron Czaplicki of Morris - who took the class with his wife, Marge, to get familiar with their new town - agreed with Gail.

"I found what they cannot do interesting. I was taught if you need a weapon in your hand, shoot to kill. These guys say it is (more important) to try and stop them."

The precautionary classes, such as the class on how to prevent identity theft and what to do if you are a victim of it, were the most helpful, Marge said.

"I liked the identity theft class more. I'm not into shooting guns. You just can't be too careful," she said.

Alumni role

Now that the 11 graduates are alumni, they are able to do a ride-along with a Morris police officer, and if they choose they can become members of the Citizen's Police Academy Alumni Association.

The academy alums give support to the police whenever they need an extra hand.

"We try to be extra bodies for them," said Bob Houlne, alumni president, at the last class May 13.

For instance, during busy festivities, such as the air show in September or the firemen's carnival in June, the alumni direct traffic and handle parking. They also handle security at the Corn Festival carnival and help out during the parade.

The alumni association members are also on hand for emergencies. When a train derailed near Goold Park in 2001, the alums were on hand to direct traffic and keep the public out of the scene.

In addition to providing help to the police, they also raise funds to purchase items the police need. In the past, the association has bought guns, a laptop computer and digital cameras for the department, Houlne said.

The association has a board of directors and currently has about 40 active members. To become a member, you must have gone through the Citizen's Police Academy and have to apply for membership. Members pay a \$10 yearly fee and meet the second Tuesday of the month.

The next Citizen's Police Academy is expected to begin in the fall or early winter, Dite said.

For more information on the academy or the alumni association, call the police department at (815) 942-2131.

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