

# Volunteering to be a cop

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BY LEN PAINTER

[lpainter@grandhaventribune.com](mailto:lpainter@grandhaventribune.com)

Following her graduation from Grand Valley State University in 1987 with a degree in criminal justice, Lisa Wagasky was sure she wanted to be a cop.



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That goal was abandoned, however, after she completed an internship at the Ottawa County Jail and briefly worked at the county's Juvenile Detention Center.

Wagasky decided then that she didn't feel comfortable with a law enforcement career.

"I was just too young to handle that kind of work at the time," said Wagasky, who now works as an advertising representative for the Grand Haven Tribune.

Fast forward to 2010 and Wagasky has finally become a cop — a mounted one.

Wagasky has become a member of the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department Mounted Unit — a group of volunteers who use their horses to patrol at various events in Ottawa County.

"I feel honored that they (sheriff's department) trust me," said the 45-year-old Wagasky.

Her interest in joining the Mounted Unit was motivated by her friend, Jaime Gordon, who is also a member of the volunteer group. "I felt that if she could do it, so could I," Wagasky recalled.

Last August, she began her quest to join the Mounted Unit. Following an interview with the Sheriff's Department, Wagasky began a rigorous training program, which included learning how to use a firearm.

"A lot of it was self-taught training," Wagasky said. She had to spend hours ensuring that her horse — Peppy — wouldn't be "spooked" by unexpected noise or movement. That meant she had to ride her horse as flares were fired off and with someone waving a flag in front of the horse. She also was required to fire blanks from her gun while mounted on Peppy, an 8-year-old Paso Fino.

"The horse has to be able to trust you," she said. "We did a lot of practicing."

So far, Wagasky and Peppy have passed muster with the Mounted Unit.

"It has been very challenging, but I like it," she said.

Wagasky was put to the test early in her new volunteer role when she was assigned to work during President Obama's visit to Holland last week. She was assigned to keep protesters away from the president's passing motorcade. Wagasky borrowed another horse for the event as Peppy is still being trained.

"My heart was in my throat," Wagasky said of being assigned to help protect the president. "The whole experience was just great. They (Secret Service) debriefed us and told us to scan the area for anything suspicious."

There were no incidents during her time at the event.

She already has a number of assignments this summer, including the Coast Guard Festival where she will patrol Dewey Hill and Harbor Island. She is also scheduled to work at the Ottawa County Fair.

Wagasky enjoys her duties, especially when it comes to showing her horse. While she finds herself busier than ever — her family has been supportive of her endeavors.

"My husband, Scott, has encouraged me to do this," she said.

At the Spring Lake Heritage Festival last month, Wagasky and Peppy were the center of attention.

"Watching the kids smile gave me a lot of satisfaction," she said. Wagasky said she was amazed at how appreciative the public is of the Mounted Unit. "People really like horses," she said.

That's just what Ottawa County Sheriff Gary Rosema expects from his Mounted Unit.

"It's a tremendous public relations tool," Rosema said. "We are all about serving the community."

Rosema said the Mounted Unit is also ideal for helping staff events such as the president's visit to Holland because riders have better views from their horses than officers who are on foot or in their patrol cars.

"They typically work the perimeter on an event," he said.

The sheriff has even used the Mounted Unit to aid in searches for evidence in hard-to-reach places.

The process to become a member of the Mounted Unit isn't an easy one. Applicants are interviewed, trained and critiqued

"We need to make sure that they have a horse that doesn't get spooked," Rosema said. "The horses have got to be used to loud noises."

Sgt. Keith Koeman, who is the immediate supervisor for the Mounted Unit, said the volunteer group is a great asset to the Ottawa County Sheriff Department.

"They are essential at events to control crowds as they can see and be seen. They also assist with vehicle parking and or direction for the same reason — because they are seen. We look for people who can work with the public and have a desire to serve," Koeman said.

He added that the horse and deputy must complete a qualification course each year in order to remain active on the unit. The deputies also attend and receive training with the reserve deputies throughout the year.

The Mounted Unit is just one of several volunteer groups that works with the Sheriff's Department. A Reserve Unit, Senior Volunteer Unit, Marine Patrol Unit, Emergency Management Unit and Victim Services Unit are also under the auspices of the department.

"We're pretty proud of our volunteers," Rosema said.

Rosema said his department encourages people to volunteer. For some people, volunteering is way to get their foot in the door to become a Sheriff's Department deputy.

For now, though, Wagasky said she prefers working as a reserve officer. "I'm proud to be wearing this uniform," she said.

For more information about the Sheriff's Department volunteer services, call (616) 738-4000.

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