

Event speakers pay heartfelt tributes to safety personnel

06/06/02

Evanston Review

Steve Bernstein had understood on an intellectual level the internal fortitude required of police officers, who respond to risky, anything-can-happen scenarios on an almost daily basis. But the 4th Ward alderman came to appreciate Evanston's police heroes on a visceral level while riding along with Officer Rick Worshill as part of his Citizens' Police Academy training. Bernstein survived his first police call of the night - the busting of some young people at Lighthouse Beach on park hours violations.

"My chest was out; I was feeling like a real policeman," recalled Bernstein, relating his experiences during a police appreciation ceremony last Thursday.

But at 3 a.m., Worshill received word of a burglary in progress on Chicago Avenue near Main Street. "This time, he doesn't say, 'Steve, come along,' " recalled Bernstein. "He said, 'Get down; here's the radio.'

"That is when the intellectual (understanding) really crystallized in every fiber of my being," Bernstein said.

"I knew in my heart I would never have the character to do that," the alderman said, conceding that his anxiety level was somewhat heightened by a lack of sleep the previous night.

"I don't think I have the ability that you heroes have, on a daily basis, to put yourself in harms way on our behalf."

Bernstein was one of a number of speakers at the Police Appreciation Ceremony, sponsored by the Police Clergy Team as a way of letting rank and file officers know their sacrifices aren't taken for granted.

This year, the event also honored the 71 police victims of the World Trade Center attack Sept. 11.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, of Evanston offered a personal account of the day from her vantage point of a Capitol Office Building within sight of the Pentagon - a building that might well have been a target in the well-orchestrated attack.

"As our building was evacuated, we rushed down flights of stairs, uncertain of the danger that could have been approaching our nation's Capitol," Schakowsky said.

As confused lawmakers, aides and interns were leaving, "the unwavering Capitol police stood their ground," Schakowsky said, remembering the professionalism of the police officers.

"With no idea of whether terrorists had picked the Capitol Building to share the fate of the World Trade Center, they stood their ground to protect and preserve life. Police officers were entering the building from which I was fleeing."

While the Sept. 11 toll marked the largest number of police casualties to occur on a single day, the deaths represented less than one-third of all duty-related police deaths in 2001.

"No matter how routine the assignment might seem, a police officer's life is always at risk," said the Rev. Kate Guistolise, an Evanston police chaplain who is a pastor at St. Mark's Episcopal Church.

Rabbi Dov Hillel Klein, of Northwestern University's Tannenbaum Chabad House, put his own spin on the notion of the "police officer on the take."

"He takes it in stride when people call him pig," said Klein, also a police chaplain.

"He takes time to explain to his family why he can't make his child's ball game or why he has to work on the holidays when other parents are off.

"He takes his paycheck, realizing that he will never be wealthy," continued Klein. "He takes in sights that would make you cry.

"He takes memories to bed each night that you could not bear - even for one day."

Local police chaplains have sponsored the appreciation ceremony each year since 1999.