

To Serve and Protect

RIDGEWATER COLLEGE'S PROFESSIONAL PEACE OFFICER AND CORRECTIONS PROGRAMS HAVE A PROUD HISTORY OF TURNING OUT WELL-TRAINED GRADUATES. AND THOSE GRADUATES ARE FINDING A WEALTH OF OPPORTUNITY IN THE WORKPLACE THESE DAYS.

By Frank Jossi

Photographs by Patrick Kelly

Just four months into his first job as the only police officer in Walnut Grove, a 30-mile drive southwest of Marshall, Mike Zeug faced a serious law-enforcement challenge. A Walnut Grove man had slain his ex-girlfriend, an extremely rare crime in a town where only 600 or so people live, and Zeug was quickly thrown into his first major criminal investigation.

Operating off what he learned in peace officer classes at Ridgewater College just a few months earlier, he made calls to the Redwood County sheriff and the state's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) to alert both parties to the fact that a murder suspect had fled the scene. As other officers arrived from different departments in the area, a manhunt began and soon afterward a local tri-county emergency response unit found the suspect in a patch of trees next to the apartment where the shooting occurred. The man surrendered without a struggle just four hours after the shooting and was later booked for the crime in Redwood County.

"The BCA field agent and the other police personnel spent six hours after the arrest getting all this stuff down," says Zeug of the 2006 murder case. "They told me, 'Mike, you did a great job, there's no other way you could have handled it.' Usually suspects are on the run a reasonable amount of time, but in this case we got him quickly."

The Walnut Grove police chief and solo officer credits his 2005 law enforcement/professional peace officer degree from Ridgewater, along with a summer skills course at Alexandria Technical College, for preparing him for a job that involves cases as extraordinary as a murder and as common as traffic tickets and domestic disturbance calls. "The skills course taught me how to handle a scene and what not to touch," he explains. "At Ridgewater I learned more technical stuff and how to apply common sense to different situations."

Diversity matters

Ridgewater offers several different law enforcement-related degree programs that have provided police departments throughout the state with hundreds of police officers over the past several decades. (See "Degree Options" at right for more information.)

Criminal justice system jobs range from probation and parole officers to community corrections and corrections' counseling positions. "There's a real growth in jobs for students on the corrections track," says Mike Kutzke, the Law Enforcement program coordinator and a 1986 Ridgewater graduate. "As society gets tougher on criminals, we're finding that the field is growing exponentially."

The courses aren't only about law enforcement, however. "We have a nice mix of

Degree Options

Prospective corrections and peace officer students have several different options at Ridgewater. They are:

- Law Enforcement/Corrections—AA degree
- Law Enforcement/Professional Peace Officer Education—AA degree
- Law Enforcement/Professional Peace Officer Education—AAS degree

For more information, go to:
www.ridgewater.edu.

liberal arts courses, to give students a background in that area, along with law enforcement courses," Kutzke says. "For example, we'll have a course such as Psychology of Law Enforcement to help students prepare for the day-to-day activities in law enforcement and get them ready for the more serious psychological and emotional challenges they will face."



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The information in this course is the kind they’ll use throughout their career.”

As Minnesota’s population has grown increasingly diverse in recent years, police officers and corrections personnel have had to learn how to deal with a wide range of different cultures. Ridgewater has addressed that trend by requiring students to take a sociology course called Race and Cultural Minorities. The emphasis has proven particularly useful for officers working in both cities and small towns. Zeug points out that more than one-third of the residents in Walnut Grove are Hmong, and the murder he dealt with involved a Hmong suspect and victim. “When the murder happened, we reached out to the Hmong community and got help from it,” he recalls. “That’s how we were able to find [the suspect] in only four hours.”

In the pipeline

Willmar Police Chief Jim Kulset graduated from Ridgewater, then known as Willmar Junior College, in 1976. After a brief stint in Morris as a police officer, he joined the Willmar force and moved up the ranks, serving as a uniformed officer, detective, and detective sergeant (“pretty much everything but dog catcher,” he says with a laugh) before being appointed chief seven years ago. He still remembers a course he took taught by Willmar City Attorney Richard Ronning. “It was a criminal law course, and it was tough,” he says. “But I learned a lot of practical applications of the law in that course that I have used many times.”

Kulset regularly looks to his alma mater when hiring new employees for his 19-officer department. “The last time I checked I found that a little over 50 percent of our licensed police officers were Ridgewater graduates,” says Kulset, who has also taught at Ridgewater as an adjunct professor. “The graduates of the college’s law enforcement program have had a huge impact on our workforce.”

Although a year or two usually goes by without any job openings on the

Willmar Police Department, Kulset says he had six positions to fill in 2005. Three of his hires for those positions were Ridgewater graduates. What’s more, Kulset’s department also established an apprentice program with Ridgewater that allows four students to work part- and full-time as “community service officers” for two years while handling such issues as animal control, parking violations, and other work that does not necessarily require the skills of licensed police officers.

Willmar’s not the only police department loaded with Ridgewater alumni, either. Kandiyohi County Sheriff Dan Hartog says his department has “hired quite a few graduates from the Ridgewater program. They come with a good, solid education.” At least half the department’s 33 officers have Ridgewater degrees, adds Hartog, a 1980 Ridgewater graduate who serves on an advisory board for law enforcement programs at the college.

According to Hartog, the strength of the college’s program lies in its use of real police practitioners as adjunct professors to speak to what police officers in the field face on a daily basis. The program is coordinated by Kutzke, who has a rich background in police work, says Hartog. Students prefer taking courses from instructors who have seen recent action in the field, rather than from those who rely on memories of what it was like years ago to work in the field.

Another Ridgewater advantage is the small learning environment, notes Hartog. The classes are small, professors get to know students, and vice versa. “It’s small enough where if you want to interact with instructors there is time to do that, which makes a difference,” he says. “You can get one-on-one help if you need it.”

Justice Is Served

A new program allows students to take SCSU Criminal Justice courses on Ridgewater’s Willmar campus.

Ridgewater College is teaming up with St. Cloud State University (SCSU) to make courses in Criminal Justice available on the Willmar campus.

Instead of attending classes in St. Cloud, students can get junior-, senior-, and graduate-level course instruction from SCSU faculty at the Ridgewater campus, and through interactive television and online options. Students have SCSU identification cards and pay SCSU tuition. The program is ideal for law-enforcement and corrections students and for people who want to advance their education but who don’t want to move or commute to St. Cloud.

The program is also the first of its kind in Minnesota. “Ridgewater President Doug Allen and Vice President Betty Strehlow have been instrumental in bringing the program to Ridgewater,” says Sheree Morgan, an adjunct SCSU faculty member and the program’s coordinator. “They have provided SCSU with technology support, classrooms, and office space at Ridgewater. We’re pleased to be able to work together and help meet the educational needs for the people in this region.”

For more information about the program, contact Sheree Morgan at 320-222-7612, or sheree.morgan@ridgewater.edu.



Dan Hartog

One challenge for Ridgewater law enforcement candidates has been the desire by many to achieve a bachelor's degree but the reluctance to relocate to attend a four-year institution. The nearest four-year college, Saint Cloud State University (SCSU), is 60 miles away.



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This issue has begun to change, however, with the arrival of Sheree Morgan, a Ridgewater grad who recently received a master's degree in criminal justice from SCSU.

Morgan, who worked for years as a state probation officer in Chisago County, is creating a distance-learning program that will connect Ridgewater stu-

dents with courses on the SCSU campus through on-site lectures, videoconferencing, and other means.

The relationship is on the edge of a growing movement toward linking community college graduates with opportunities at four-year institutions in their regions, says Bob Prout, chair of the criminal justice program at SCSU. “On the whole, our best students are older, they’re working, they’re not 18 years old,” he says, noting that the description fits many of Ridgewater’s students. “They’re trying to get a degree done and they work hard at it.” (For more information on the program, see “Justice Is Served” on page 19.)

Zeug was one of those older students. He drove semi-trailers for more than a decade before deciding, at the age of 34, to change careers and get into law enforcement. He saved \$5,000 for tuition, took out loans for another \$10,000, and earned some money on the side working as a mechanic while he attended Ridgewater.

Today he’s living just nine miles from where he grew up. He enjoys a position where he meets new people every week and faces different situations every day. He’s also committed to doing proactive policing by keeping in close touch with community members to deter crime before it happens. “Like anyone else, you complain about things once in a while,” he says. “But you’re helping out your community in a job like this, and that’s what I like about it. It’s much different than the other jobs I’ve had.”

Frank Jossi is a St. Paul-based freelance writer.