

ART PROJECT HELPS REVEAL UNSEEN SIDE OF OFFICERS

The Portland Press Herald covers the release of the Police Poetry Calendar and AEI. Portland police partner with artists to create a calendar of photos and poems, either by the officers or about their work.

by David Hensch, Staff Writer, December 18, 2008

One police officer wrote about the questions he fields from his young son. Another wrote about the uniform and equipment she dons for each night's shift.

Cops and poetry. It's an unlikely pairing, based on stereotypes, but that's what makes it intriguing – and from Marty Pottenger's perspective, a successful joint venture.

"Yes, it's a very strange idea, that city workers would be creating art about their lives and their jobs," said Pottenger, director of the Arts & Equity Initiative, a partnership between the city of Portland and Terra Moto Inc., a nonprofit arts group. "The intention in this is to permanently shift the relationship between the community and the police department in a big way."

The result is a 2009 calendar featuring photography and writing either by officers or about their work.

Five poets and five artists were each paired with an officer, spending time together over the past two months. The collaboration gave officers a chance to convey some of their frustration, their fears and the impressions they leave on the people around them.

The artists had a chance to see a world and a perspective that's not available to most people, to use images and words to expose facets of an officer's job that even they take for granted. The project seeks to use art inspired by and produced by people in municipal government as a way to build camaraderie, break down stereotypes and promote communication.

It might have been a lot harder to get the officers to go along with the idea, if it weren't for Sgt. Rob Johnsey.

Johnsey died from an accidental gunshot wound in May as he prepared his gear for work. At his funeral, many officers learned that Johnsey enjoyed writing poetry.

"He's the reason we're here," said Lt. Mike Sauschuck, one of the officer poets. "Poetry was a true love of his, and one, given our chosen profession, he really hid from people."

The calendar includes two poems by Johnsey, including one that was read by Sauschuck Wednesday at the news conference announcing the calendar's availability.

When introducing the idea, Pottenger told a group of lieutenants that she understood it seemed weird.

Stereotypes exist for a reason, after all. Police officers are men and women of action, not necessarily of introspection. And some officers took the opportunity to write farcical, somewhat off-color rhymes.

But Pottenger enjoyed and encouraged it, calling them "warrior poets."

There are some similarities between the writers and the officers, said Betsy Sholl, Maine's poet laureate, who worked on the project. "We both have to be attentive and thoughtful about what we do."

There are differences, too.

"In police work, there is no do-over. In poetry, it's all do-over," she said.

The initiative is working with other city's departments, doing block carving prints with public works crews and organizing a writers group for city employees. Other cities, including Los Angeles and New Orleans, have expressed interest in the project, Pottenger said.

Officer Alissa Poisson had not written poetry since high school, but in some ways she was a logical choice for the assignment. Her sergeant refers to her as his "hippie" because she's relatively open-minded compared with some of the others on the team. But it was still difficult.

"On the job, you try to keep your emotions out of it. Here, you were asked to open up this box of emotion," she said.

Her poem, "The Things I Carry," took an otherwise mundane list of items each officer brings on every shift and made it poignant.

"Everything on there has a kind of meaning to it," she said.

"People look at the cliché, the stereotype," said Chief Joseph Loughlin. "I think (officers) found it helpful to say what was on the inside. We are human beings. We're not robots."

For more information about the project or the calendar, visit www.artatwork.us. The calendar is available at bookstores for \$15, with a portion of the proceeds going to the Robert Johnsey Memorial Fund and a portion going to the Arts & Equity Initiative.