

**MY NAME IS JESSIE
AND I CANNOT LEAVE**

BY SUSAN SHULTZ
TALES FROM THE GRAVEYARD, NOVELLA 2

JESSIE

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TALES FROM THE GRAVEYARD, NOVELLA 2

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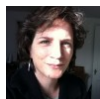
Resource officers in schools work to build community

By [Elizabeth G. Howard](#) on March 7, 2014 in [News](#), [Police & Fire](#), [School News](#), [Stratford Features](#) · [2 Comments](#)



Stratford Police Lt. Melissa Niemiec and Wooster Middle School Resource Officer Al Voccola show off Voccola's whiteboard full of students' notes of thanks. Elizabeth G. Howard photo.

About author



Elizabeth G. Howard

Elizabeth Howard is a Stratford-based journalist, blogger and poet. She writes on the arts, education, music, the

Stratford police officers are assigned in Stratford Public Schools' middle and high schools as a community resource, a parent resource, a department resource, and an administrative resource.

At Wooster and Flood middle schools and Stratford and Bunnell high schools, the school resource officers, or SROs, park their cruisers in front of the school or nearby. They wear their uniform to work every day, including their service weapon, and that uniform carries the weight of respect and meaning from the kids, and the community.

"It's true," said Lt. Melissa Niemiec, who oversees support services, which includes the SRO program, school safety and the Police Activities League. "The

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« JUNE 2015 »						
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1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	1	2	3	4	5

TUE 02 Senior calendar: May 29-June 4
 June 1 @ 8:30 am - June 4 @ 4:00 pm

TUE 02 Catholic Daughters meeting
 June 2 @ 6:30 pm

environment, green lifestyle, American culture, travel and food. You can find her online at elizabethoward.net

uniform itself is like a kind of 'force.'"

To help, not write tickets

Officer Al Voccola is assigned to Wooster. He left patrol 11 years ago to take up his position as SRO. He's 53, and his own children are past school age, yet he says he connects with the middle school kids. He surprises them by knowing their music, knowing their apps, and most of all, knowing how to intervene when trouble is afoot.

"The kids don't look at me as a police officer," Voccola said. "I'm 'Al' not Patrol Officer Voccola. I am not in the hallway writing tickets. They don't question it. It is a positive reality. Kids come up to me in the hall and tease and talk to me. They know they can come to me, and they know I am here to help, not to hurt."

The whiteboard behind his desk, covered with silly words of thanks and love from students, is proof of his relationship there.

Voccola, along with Frank Sapione at Flood, Trish Tesla at Bunnell and Jose Escobar at Stratford High, make up the team of SROs in the district. These SROs work a beat in the schools that may be more proactive than being on patrol. They are there for prevention. For the kids, they are counselors and educators. The SROs develop educational programs for the district on bullying, drugs, sexting, driving programs, and social media, to name a few.

They are there, in the hallways, to say hello and to just answer a kid's question about a cell phone app, or give advice about bullying. Recently one student pulled the fire alarm at Wooster and another student felt comfortable to say, 'Officer Voccola! I can tell you who did it!'

Helping troubled youths

But students do make mistakes, get in trouble and get arrested. Tough domestic situations at home invade school life. The administration and the SROs work together to intervene and provide support, Voccola says.

"One time this mother came up to me and hugged me and thanked me, saying, 'You arrested my daughter!'" Voccola says. "What happened was after the arrest, I gave her all the information to help the daughter out, the people to contact, and the daughter later turns out wonderful. That's the resource part of my job."

Social media

One of the biggest vulnerabilities, the SROs and the administrators agree, is right in each student's pocket — mobile phones. The SROs agree this is the students' biggest distraction. Voccola stays on top of the latest apps. He says Facebook is dead for kids, SnapChat is on the way out, and the next latest app is just waiting to be discovered.

"We will tell these kids, Be careful what you put out there because you can't erase it," Voccola says. "You maybe want be a teacher or a cop someday? Well, they want you to sign a release for all your social media. Even going to colleges now, they look at this."

Last week, Bunnell SRO Tesla bused students from Stratford High School for a texting and driving simulator class. On monitors, students are able to watch a fellow student drive a real car while texting and see the terrifying results.

"The texting and the inappropriate texting is our biggest problem," Tesla says. "Getting them to the point they understand the full ramifications of it, of how it will impact their future. Sexting has come up as a problem and it is difficult. Social media is a school and a police officer's nightmare."

A unit with school

At Bunnell, Tesla works closely with the administrative team. "It is not just me. We are a team here," Tesla says. "I work with the administration. If there is a kid with trouble, we come together to devise a plan. It's not the Police Department over here and the high school over there. We are a unit that works together to get the result we want."

Tesla and Bunnell Assistant Principal Nancy Dowling make a striking pair sitting

TUE
02
CHIRP 2015
June 2 @ 7:00 pm

THU
04
Major League Baseball Umpire Mark Hirschbeck
June 4 @ 10:00 am

THU
04
Thursday Night Ballroom Dance Party
June 4 @ 7:30 pm - 11:00 pm



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across from one another — one in full police uniform, including body armor vest, and one in refined office attire. The school's philosophy, Dowling said, is that students "have to feel they are loved and are cared for before [they] can make progress. [Tesla] is right here as a part of that philosophy."

"I think the intent of the SRO program is to approach kids as kids. To try to understand the big picture of them as a person, as a kid, before you deal with behavior. That's second," Dowling says.

Having the "force" of the uniformed police in the school is meaningful to the community, too, Dowling says. Before the Sandy Hook incident, she says, having a police cruiser sitting in front of a school gave an impression that something negative was going on in the school. Now, she says, it sends the message that the school is safe.

Our primary objective is to keep kids safe. These are other people's children. That is a priority. Trish being in the uniform is important. Not to keep the kids accountable, but to keep the community accountable to our kids."

Complex role

So the SROs' role is complex and multi-layered. To the parents and community, they are protectors. To students, they are counselors and teachers. To administrators, they are consultants and team members. To their patrol colleagues, they are liaisons and, in a sense, social workers.

Having the SROs as liaison between the schools and the Police Department has been one of the best outcomes, Niemiec says. While all the team members respect privacy laws, Dowling says, the SROs have bridged the gap between the schools and the police. If patrol officers or the Fire Department need to enter the school, Wooster Principal Jack Lynch says, they have the SRO on the ground to answer questions easily. And SROs are in regular communication with their department, which helps them understand the school communities needs and problems, Dowling says.

"There is a level of trust that has been established and enhanced between the school administration and the police. If there is a medical emergency or the police are here to supervise an event, there is a seamless, sort of quiet, unobstructed collaboration."

Voccola and Tesla agree that as SROs, they know the kids better. They know their backgrounds, and are able to respond to incidents with more knowledge and more compassion than they did when they were on patrol.

"I have learned just as much from the kids as they have learned from me," Tesla says. "I learned there is more to them than I thought there would be. You don't realize the complicated lives some of these kids have, the diverse backgrounds, and the obstacles that some of them have overcome. It makes me cherish them, and what they have accomplished."

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