

# My First Year As A Police Officer

By Rachelle King Barham

**This is not meant to take away from anyone else's job, we want you to understand the differences.**

What did you learn your first year on the job?

Did you learn where the employee breakroom, copy machine and restrooms are? I learned where the dope holes, crack houses and gang turfs are. I learned which gas stations had the cleanest restrooms and which ones to avoid.

Did you learn when quitting time arrives to already have your computer turned off and your briefcase packed so you could get out the door and hopefully beat the traffic? I learned not to expect to get off on time. I learned that sometimes banks get robbed, people get shot and women are raped at times that are not necessarily convenient for me.

Did you learn that it is easier to run down the stairs instead of getting on an elevator that is going to stop at every floor? I learned to run through backyards and apartment complexes in a crouch, holding my hand up so I wouldn't get clothes-lined in the dark. I learned to run around corners low and wide in case someone was on the other side waiting on me. And I learned to be careful running through "cuts" because they were quite often booby trapped with razor wire or trip lines. Sometimes I learned the hard way.

Did you learn when you get to take your lunch break? Which places nearby are less crowded so you can sit down and enjoy your 30 minutes or hour and eat in peace? I don't get a lunch break. I learned to eat with one hand while writing a report with the other. I learned that sometimes I might get to eat two or three bites before I have to run out the door to a barricade situation, and it might be six hours before I get another chance to eat something. I learned to eat fast. I learned that on the rare occasions when I did get to sit down and enjoy a decent meal instead of a taco while driving down the road, that there is no such thing as eating in peace. More likely than not, someone with a problem would come up and start off with, "I don't mean to bother you while your're eating, but..."

When you take your coffee break, does anyone accuse you of wasting your employer's money?

Did you learn that if you are the last one out of the office to turn off the lights and lock the door? I learned to hold my flashlight away from my body so no one could use it as a target for parts of my body that I prefer to keep hole-free. I learned that when I bail out of my squad car after a thug I better take the time to turn off the engine and lock the doors, because people will actually go into it and steal things or drive off in it. I'm glad I didn't learn that one the hard way.

Did you sometimes have dreams about giving a presentation to a group of people and suddenly you realize you are in your underwear? I would have dreams about getting in a shoot out with someone and no matter how hard I tried to pull the trigger my gun wouldn't go off. Or I would watch my bullets just bounce off the bad guy. Or my legs were frozen and felt like they weighed 1,000 pounds and I couldn't move to even take cover. The fear we are not permitted to show manifests itself in our dreams. It is a very common phenomenon in my line of work.

Do you pray with your co-workers before you start your day for God to bring you home safe at the end of it? Would it even be necessary in your line of work?

This job takes its toll on the human body. Our life expectancy is shorter than that of the average person, even if we aren't killed in a squad car wreck, shot by a crack head or found hanging in our own bedroom. One hundred and sixty police officers were killed in the line of duty in 2010, a 37 percent increase from the year before. More than twice that is number of police officers that killed themselves. What is the suicide rate on your job?

Have you experienced the emotional turmoil of seeing a two-year-old girl raped so badly she will never be able to have children of her own? Or a 13-year-old boy shot to death in a drive-by while playing basketball in his own driveway? Or wanted to shake a mother until her brains rattled because her boyfriend did the same thing to her six-month-old baby but she won't speak against him? Try dealing with that and then going home and try NOT to be a neurotic parent to your own children. That's something else I learned my first year—how to compartmentalize. It keeps me from kicking the dog, drinking myself into oblivion and locking my kids in their rooms until they are 25.

Seventeen years later, I am still here because of the things I learned in my first year. When I was in the Academy, I learned the law, how to shoot, how to write a ticket and how to take a report. In my first year, I learned how to be a police officer. I learned how to stay alive. What did you learn?

No one complains about a baseball player signing a \$35 million contract, or an actor getting paid \$20 million for a movie. In fact, we willingly shell out the money for the exorbitant ticket prices that allow this to happen. Personally, I can rarely afford to take my family of six to a movie or a ballgame. But pay a cop for the holidays they work while you are opening your presents or enjoying your turkey dinner? No, we shouldn't do that...that is extraneous spending. Give them enough sick days per year so that an unexpected surgery or broken leg doesn't cost them their home? Why? What have they ever done for us?

Do you want to know the most important thing I learned my first year? In spite of it all, I love my job and I love this city. Unfortunately, it becomes more and more apparent that this is an unrequited love.