

Public Affairs Bureau



Sheriff Hunter On Radford Investigation

It is no secret to any resident of Collier County of more than perhaps a year, that the Naples Daily News editorial page editor has expressed recurring agitation toward the Collier County Sheriff's Office. When I have called him in the past to complain of his opinions published without factual basis he has unashamedly replied (paraphrased) "I don't need to call you for the facts, Don, my editorial opinion is my opinion."

His most recent personal attacks suggesting that I am not aggressive enough for his liking in conducting internal affairs reviews (controlled by state statute) or that I give thorough answers that do not meet his standards for brevity are not factual or reasonable. The Daily News continues to try to paint a picture for the public of our agency that no one can any longer recognize as the Collier County Sheriff's Office. The truth is diametrically opposite what the editorial comment and headlines would have you believe.

Far from being ridden with problems and problem members we are no different statistically from any other organization. We are populated with highly skilled, committed professionals. The difference in our organization from most is that our members are willing and expected to expose themselves to life threatening circumstances coupled with relentless exposure to emotional and psychological risks in the daily performance of their duties. They do this courageously and what they do is beyond what most people including the editorial page editor, would be willing and able to do.

We have experienced over the course of my twenty years as Sheriff, a small fraction of members who do not conduct themselves in a fashion acceptable to us. In the event that we receive complaint or discover an issue with such conduct an investigation is performed, by carefully prescribed processes dictated by law, and a finding is published to the public with disciplinary action taken against members deserving of same.

Our agency members have been carefully screened from the general population, using the most rigorous process permitted by law and in which the public may continue to have full faith of our general professional health as an organization. I cannot account for the occasional perception issue and gratuitous remark from people, including Sgt. Cooper of the FHP in this more recent internal affairs investigation of member Tray Radford. Sgt. Cooper's remark that we were not fully cooperative in the investigation of Tray Radford's crash was unsubstantiated; an impression. His remark suggests that we should have exerted more initiative in trying to find possible witnesses; Sara Barraco Vasquez and any others. We pursued his remark in our internal affairs investigation but have no closure to our concern. Sgt. Cooper does not explain any violation of our policies or of professional expectations.

My reading of the actual testimony persuades me that we did not create any barriers to a full inquiry.

I respect FHP Sgt. Cooper's assessment but I cannot and do not subscribe to it. His statement is based on an impression. There is no evidence offered or confirmed to contradict my confidence in the on-duty members involved in this incident.

Unlike the editorial page editor, law enforcement is generally not permitted to offer unsupported public conjecture as it tends to defame those whose reputations are sullied.

I will add that an entire agency was available to Sgt. Cooper at any moment during the course of his investigation if he believed that there was anything less than full cooperation from a particular member. Certainly some of our 1,349 members may have been more familiar with Mrs. Barraco Vasquez in such a way that we may have been able to make contact with her.

The Collier County Sheriff's Office will continue to have challenges to its internationally recognized policies and procedures and we will continue to aggressively pursue action against those who violate our directives.

I have personally invited FHP Sgt. Cooper to give another formal statement to provide evidence that supports his statement that members did not conduct themselves properly.

Don Hunter, Sheriff