

Officer keeps manners in check

Being cordial while reviewing hunting licenses helped earn annual state award

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Article Photos



Mirror photo by William Kibler
Waterways Conservation Officer Craig Garman (right) checks the hunting license of Lee Bachman of Denver, Pa., on a ridge overlooking Route 22 last week.

Guns can equalize power differences.

So it makes sense for an armed conservation officer who regulates armed hunters and fishermen to spurn the high-and-mighty approach in favor of one that encourages mutual respect.

That approach has helped Waterways Conservation Officer Craig Garman earn Pennsylvania Officer of the Year honors for 2008 from the North East Conservation Law Enforcement Chiefs Association.

"I try to treat people like I like to be treated," said Garman, a 16-year officer with the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission whose territory comprises Blair County and part of Huntingdon County, where he freely moves from fish to game regulation, as needed.

His golden rule method was on display last week when he encountered a pair of long-distance hunters seated on camp chairs along the former New Portage Railroad right of way, scoping for bear on the ridge opposite, across Route 22, hundreds of yards away.

Shadowed by a Mirror reporter, Garman talked with the hunters, asked about their equipment and luck so far, then asked to check their licenses and weapons, without a hint on either side of pique or annoyance.

Lee Bachman of Denver, Pa., was "very pleasantly surprised" at the encounter, he said later.

"He did his job," Bachman said. "He asked us for the information he needed."

But he was cordial, interested and positive, in contrast to some conservation officers he's dealt with over the years, Bachman said.

It could easily have been otherwise, because the hunters, who were working with a pair of companions up the trail, "push the threshold" with their long-range scouting, shooting and retrieval, Bachman said.

Some question the ethics of their practices, believing they can't kill responsibly, he said, although he and the others spoke of their highly accurate, powerful rifles and explained that they use their scopes and radios to guide each other to locate a kill.

Being a conservation officer requires a "whole different mindset," said Al Zellner, a wildlife conservation officer who works frequently with Garman.

Whereas a regular police officer in the city reacts negatively to someone he encounters who has a gun, it's a routine matter for a conservation officer.

That dictates additional caution, Garman said.

Especially as many hunters and fishermen see encounters with officers as interference with their recreation, Zellner said.

Officers can't let their badges go to their heads, said Don Trombetto, law enforcement supervisor for the Game Commission and longtime collaborator with Garman.

Garman, a Huntingdon native, gives respect freely, but he expects the same in return.

Ninety-five percent of the hunters and fishermen he encounters reciprocate, and a good percentage of those who don't come around eventually, Garman said.

He figures his best weapon is his mouth.

There are ways to make even being found in the wrong a positive, he said.

He keeps calm, explains what he's doing, doesn't make it personal, points out that he has no choice but to do what the job demands and tells them that if they have a continued grievance, they can take it to court.

He tries never to "escalate" matters.

He writes three or four warnings for every citation.

Still, some cop an attitude.

But he can still talk some of them out of it. One hunter who felt harassed at first due to a prior encounter that day with another officer ended up apologizing to Garman, he said.

Yet sometimes he needs to get in peoples' faces as a last resort; often in those cases, the hunters or fishermen have been drinking, he said.

Or they may be drug users who come to "the middle of nowhere" believing they don't need to worry about getting caught.

In addition to his main responsibilities to enforce conservation laws - hunting, fishing, environmental - he carries full authority for law enforcement as a police officer.

Sometimes, he discovers arrest warrants when he runs ID checks.

Things can get dicey because, unlike most municipal officers, he usually works alone and often without reasonable hope of backup.

He remembers one time at Canoe Creek State Park, finding an arrest warrant for something like child support and hearing the concern and dismay of the suspect's companions escalate. He explained that he had a bench warrant and had to take him into custody.

He spent time working as a corrections officer at the State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon, which helped him develop a feel for dealing with situations like that.

Before each encounter, he tries to think what he should do if things go bad.

Watching body language can be key.

State police are the primary backup in most cases, but with two cars out in the county, they can be far away or tied up on other calls, Garman said.

If he really needs backup, he may seek it from alternative sources, such as the Game Commission or a municipal police department.

The Blair County 911 center is consistently helpful, he said.

Sometimes a situation may call for delaying a suspect until help arrives.

If push comes to shove, however, his main goal is to "go home to my family," he said.

Earlier in the day, Garman chatted up hunters he encountered on a game lands road and all seemed eager to please, paying heightened attention, like honor students talking to their science teacher.

"I like to talk to people," he said.

He tries to avoid complacency, although it's not easy after a long succession of pleasant encounters.

He's never been physically assaulted.

Garman had the opportunity for promotion to office work but has declined.

"This is my office," he said. "Talking to people, doing the things I love."

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