

Wildlife officer cadets prepare for job's challenges in the wake of officer's fatal shooting

Published: Sunday, February 13, 2011, 12:00 AM Updated: Sunday, February 13, 2011, 9:09 AM
http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2011/02/wildlife_officer_cadets_prepar.html

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[Enlarge](#) [CHRISTINE BAKER, The Patriot-News](#) David L. Grove graduated with the Pennsylvania Game Commission Ross Leffler School's 27th class. He was killed in the line of duty on Nov. 11, 2010, near Fairfield, PA. Memorial posters honoring David hang throughout the school. CHRISTINE BAKER, The Patriot-News [Patrolling the Wilds](#) gallery (7 photos)

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Tim Grenoble looked at his 28 hopefuls, sitting at wooden desks, hands resting on green blotter paper.

They had been chosen from a field of 800 for the most demanding wildlife officer-training program in the country. They arrived at the Ross Leffler School of Conservation — the wing of a suburban office building with a vast, unlandscaped backyard — one Sunday afternoon last March.

Welcome, said Grenoble, the program director.

The cadets, who had come from across the state to be Pennsylvania's next wildlife conservation officers, listened.

Jason Kelley had always wanted to be there. He had grown up hunting turkey and deer with his father in Bradford County, and after a decade of bouncing between failing businesses there, he was ready to sacrifice for something better.

Ronda Bimber wanted something better, too. She had spent 10 years as a dispatcher for the Game Commission, radioing calls out to conservation officers, including her husband, Rod, in Clarion County. But there was no room for advancement there. After years of burying a desire to work in law enforcement, she decided to commit.

Maybe Greg Graham should have been there sooner. He had volunteered as a WCO deputy for 16 years in Lancaster County. He had always loved the outdoors and police work while he ran a gunsmithing businesses and a pair of gun shops. At 51, he wasn't ready to retire. So there he sat, the oldest cadet in the school's history, because it wasn't too late.

They didn't know what was coming, for themselves, their class or the conservation officers already in the field. In the following 11 months, Kelley, Bimber and Graham would each face unexpected challenges.

They would have to deal with [the fatal shooting of David Grove](#), an officer who had sat in that classroom three years earlier, the first Pennsylvania WCO to be killed in the line of duty in 95 years.



[View full size](#)The Associated Press, fileDavid Grove

It would all lead them to where they stand today, weeks shy of graduation and each ready to take control of a 350-square-mile district.

But that day last March, sitting before Grenoble, they were still new. The cadets had been on campus barely two hours, just enough time to move into their spartan three-person dorm rooms on the second floor.

For the next 50 weeks, Grenoble told the cadets, we will teach you and test you in almost every way. Some days, you'll be in this classroom from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., learning every arcane subset of game law. Some days, you'll be in the field, pulling a bear's tooth or autopsying a deer. Some of it will be fun. Some of it won't.

You only get to go home on the weekends. Between the schedule and sheer exhaustion, you should get used to short phone conversations with your families.

We are a college, a police academy and a museum. We will give you a more extensive education than any other game warden in the country, if not the world. If you can't handle the pressure here, you'll never be able to manage a district.

If you succeed, your reward will be a \$40,000-a-year job with impossibly long hours. You'll have to move on short notice. You'll have endless paperwork. You'll work alone. You'll face dangerous encounters with armed men in the dark.

There's no shame if you decide this isn't for you, Grenoble told them. You'd be doing yourself and the agency a favor if you quit. And some of you will quit.

We start tomorrow morning at 5.

March to August

Ronda Bimber thought she knew the drill.

When her husband, Rod, went through the program in 1998, she typed up his notes on the weekend. She had heard his stories about the classes, the trick questions on the tests, the hours of study. After 10 years working for the Game Commission, she knew the agency and a lot of the people.

Then school started.

She was 37. She and Rod lived on a 100-acre farm with seven horses and 50 chickens. She was used to freedom.

Then last spring, her life got boiled down to a few hundred square feet, a wooden desk and her books. In order to study for a job in the wilds, she had to live a confined, almost monastic life, with almost every minute of her day scheduled. Boots have to be shined, and beds require hospital corners.

At home, she paid the bills and did the grocery shopping. On campus, all that had to fall away.

"I didn't know how stressful it was going to be," she said. "You make the calls home and the cat's sick ... and there's nothing you can do."

Instead, she studied. They all did.

To stay in the program, cadets have to keep their averages above an 80. They have to keep taking tests on criminal procedures until they score a perfect 100. The material is not easy. They learn about wildlife habitats, the rules for hunting and trapping, criminal investigation and basic prosecution.

On weekdays, the cadets' one reprieve came on Wednesday nights. Instructors gave them from 5 p.m. until lights out at 10:30 to leave campus.

In the early weeks, Greg Graham, the 51-year-old, would drive home to Lancaster County for dinner with his wife. Before school started, it had been 30 years since Graham sat in a classroom. He had to reteach himself to take notes and study. It all seemed harder than before.

Even his experience as a deputy didn't always help. One day, when they were learning handcuffing technique, Graham volunteered to demonstrate.

"You did it exactly right — the way we used to do it," the instructor told him.

Wednesday night dinner was a refuge for Graham. At least he wanted it to be. Instead, he just looked at the clock, watching the seconds tick by until it was time to return to campus. He couldn't sit still in his own home.

After a few weeks, he and his wife decided Graham's weekend visits home would have to do for the year.

Around the same time, Jason Kelley, the Bradford County native, and his wife were making a similar decision. He had been driving 90 minutes north every Wednesday to meet his wife and 11-year-old daughter, who had driven 90 minutes south to meet him.

It quickly became a grind on all three. Kelley started spending his Wednesdays in Harrisburg with the other cadets. They'd grab dinner or wander through Bass Pro Shop, looking at stuff.

After 12 or 13 weeks, he said, everyone seemed adjusted to life on campus.

Then his wife called. She was pregnant. She was due in January. He would be away for the entire pregnancy.

August to December

I've been there, Graham thought.

I've pulled over a poacher, alone, at night, when any backup is far away. I've done it against my initial good judgment. I've had to pull my weapon.

It just kept tumbling through his head on the morning of Nov. 12. He was in Greene County, partnered with a veteran WCO on one of three field training assignments. He was brushing his teeth when his training officer knocked on the door and told him: David Grove was killed last night outside Gettysburg.

The news shook the cadets, who were spread across the state in motels and spare bedrooms for field training. They all knew Grove. In August, he had taught them emergency vehicle operations.

Through the morning, text messages bounced back and forth as the cadets searched for details. The more Graham heard, the more he thought of his years as a deputy.

Grove pulled over a poacher, state police said. When Grove went to handcuff the poacher, the poacher allegedly shot the 31-year-old and left him to die on a back road.

I've been there, Graham thought. I just didn't get shot.

Kelley got the news from his training officer in a Snyder County motel. Let's just relax for the day, the officer told Kelley.

It didn't quite work like that.

Instead, Kelley thought, I was there just last night. He and his training officer had been on night patrols, just like Grove. They had pulled over a car, just like Grove.

Inside, they found three men, one of whom was hiding a sawed-off shotgun underneath his hoodie.

"It was business as usual," Kelley said. "It was only 10 minutes later when we're in the car driving away that I thought, 'Oh, my God.'"

I've been there, Kelley thought, I just didn't get shot.

Bimber heard in a motel room. She was doing her field work in York County, half an hour from where Grove died.

So, she thought, it finally happened.

She had heard stories from her husband and other officers. She had heard stories over the dispatch radio. Drunks with guns. Guys angry that their night shooting was being cut off. Guys mad that an officer was busting their scene. She had heard so many close calls.

They sent her to the crime scene to help the investigation officers. She combed through the woods looking for guns or other deer the alleged shooter might have picked off that night. She talked to neighbors and ran down stories.

"We were working 15-to-18-hour days," she said. "You don't really have time to think or eat or sleep. You were just doing."

She needed to invest herself in that work. It gave her a purpose in this thing that made too much sense. A few days later, she volunteered to work that district's dispatch. Those operators need a break, too, she told her supervisor. I can give it to them.

After Grove's funeral and their field training was finished, Grenoble, the program director, called

each of the cadets into his office. How are you doing, he would ask. How is your family? Can you keep going? Can you, and their families, live with the risk?

One by one, the cadets said they could.

“You come into this job knowing what could happen,” Kelley said. “I think in our own little ways, each person has prepared themselves for that.”

Graham and his wife Betty talked. When he first started doing patrols, Betty would call the dispatcher if she hadn’t heard from her husband in several hours. But after time, she said, you learn to trust him and the training. But it never gets easy.

The cadets wanted to go into the field. Grove was fulfilling a mission, they said. They believed in that mission.

Now

For the cadets, Friday night meant going home.

And for Kelley, that meant seeing his ever-more pregnant wife. Seeing the week-to-week changes in her body was like watching a cartoon in a flip book.

They had been trying for a second child, and Kelley was thrilled when he heard the news. But they both knew he would be away, and there are some things no e-mail or five-minute phone call can replace. That knowledge only compounded the classwork strain, which he said, was harder than his criminal justice degree.

But he and his wife agreed the program was worth it.

Kelley, 30, had first applied when he was still an undergraduate at Mansfield, but got passed over. He waited for his chance through a series of jobs: guard at Bradford County prison, a counselor at a group home for troubled youth (until the home’s grant money ran out), and one factory job after another. When he found out the Game Commission was accepting applications again, he passed on a scheduled interview with the state police liquor-control unit.

He had to finish.

Kelley got the call to go home Jan. 18. He left at 2:30 a.m. and drove home through a snowstorm to see his son, Hoyt, born the next day. He got four days with his family.

He returned to campus on the home stretch. The 21 cadets still in the program — three of the initial 28 quit, another four were dismissed — are all expected to graduate March 5.

That doesn’t mean life has gotten any easier.

Earlier this month, most of the cadets received their district assignments, the 350-mile area they will begin patrolling four days after graduation. The cadets could request an assignment, but

ultimately, the commission sends them where they are needed.

As WCOs, they will have to live in their districts or, in some exceptions, very close to it. The cadets' few spare moments have been spent scouting school districts and scrolling through real estate websites.

Bimber was assigned to a Venango County district next to the district where her husband will soon begin patrolling.

"He's moving to a new district," she said. "I'm moving to a new district. We don't have a home yet. ... It's been a little anxious."

The Bimbers, who now live on a horse farm, don't just need a new house. When they move, it won't be as simple as renting a U-haul and ordering pizza.

Graham is still waiting for his assignment. The commission has told him it wants to first fill a few transfer requests by existing officers to see if Graham can find a district closer to Lancaster County, where his parents and his two grown sons reside.

He's lived in his house for 20 years. His wife recently got a new job. But unless his district comes open, they'll be packing and Betty will start commuting.

"A lot of these guys can pick up and move a little easier than I can," he said.

Kelley, headed for Northumberland County, just put his house on the market. It's a crazy time, said the man who has spent his whole life in Bradford County. But it's something new.

Once they get to their districts, Grenoble said, the work only begins.

For an officer to succeed, they have to become part of the community. Get to know your deputies. Get to know the sportsmen's clubs. Get to know the local police departments. Get to know your neighbors. Get to know the wildlife. Get to know the land. What spots do poachers favor? Where in your game lands do teens go to party? Where do drug dealers meet up?

Even after all the classwork, they will come across something new every week. They will have to react. They will have to make life-and-death decisions about when to pursue a suspect and when to hang back.

The learning, Grenoble said, never stops.

"Even at their best," he said. "it usually takes a good three years before you have this job figured out."