

PUBLIC SAFETY: Dedicated officer inspiration to colleagues

CHIEF LA BARGE HANGS UP BADGE

BY JOE FANTAUZZI
jfantauzzi@yrmg.com

Armand La Barge points to a home on Peevers Crescent he can see from the window while sitting at his desk in Newmarket's police headquarters.

It's that home, which he considers a symbol of the residents of York Region, that the region's outgoing chief has used to bring perspective to the job during his eight years as York's top cop.

"It's that touch back to reality," he said in the lead-up to his Dec. 12 departure.

"That individual over there is paying taxes for what we're doing and that individual is concerned about the safety and security of his community. You have to ask yourself: what would that man say about what we're going to do, or not going to do?"

Chief La Barge is a man described by colleagues as having inspiring them to be as dedicated to their job as he is.

While confident, he has not struck a combative pose when dealing with the public or media, often submitting himself to questions about the force's policies.

'The community was a lot more innocent than it is today.'

And he admits he had some help along the way.

He considers former chief Don Hillock a mentor.

Chief La Barge, 56, wants his 37-year policing career to be punctuated by the community partnerships he helped build and a focus on law enforcement, along with crime prevention.

His long-serving deputy chief Eric Jolliffe succeeds him Dec. 13.

"I had kind of gone through an examination of what I had done and what I had to do and I came to the realization that a lot of what I had wanted to do has been done," he said.

He pointed to the war York police have waged on marijuana grow operations and massage parlours, noting both have decreased.

For example, there are currently about six

massage parlours operating in York, down from more than 100 about a decade ago. As well, 173 grow-ops were closed down in 2003 and another 35 were shut down this year.

He wanted to leave while he was still young enough to do other things. Not leaving too soon, but also not overstaying his welcome. He plans to continue his graduate studies next year.

He already has a bachelor of arts honours degree, a multiculturalism studies certificate from York University and a master's degree from Trent University in Canadian and Native Studies.

"Fortuitous as well that my contract expires in December," he added. "It's a good time for a new chief to start."

He said he will miss the job, his policing colleagues and the community, but he knows there is life beyond policing.

He has visited Jamaica, Morocco, South Korea and Poland where he took part in aid work and plans to continue doing more.

"I'm very passionate about that. I find it richly fulfilling."

And, while he is not considering running for elected office now, he is "fascinated" by national politics.

"If an appointment came up, I would seriously consider it, if I thought it was something I could assist with making this a better country or a better world," he said.

In the meantime, growth is the biggest challenge his successors will face, he said.

To match that pressure, during the past eight years, the force and the police services board have put more officers on the road, in specialized units and in civilian support roles, he said.

The York force has raised its public profile, the chief said. A greater emphasis has been placed on police visibility in the community as a result of the force and the police board working together, he said.

Meeting the expectations of the public can also prove challenging, he noted.

Policing in such a diverse community has been an opportunity, he said, adding it's important for officers to gain an understanding of the region's various cultures.

He also doesn't buy into stereotypes about young people being difficult and antagonistic toward police.



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

York Regional Police Chief Armand La Barge steps down Dec. 12.

He spoke highly of young people and how it is important to reach them early about the importance of empathy, honesty and respect.

"They are 100 per cent of our future," he said. "The more we can arm them with the tools to make healthy lifestyle choices and stay away from the guns and the gangs and the drugs and the alcohol...then I think the better off the future of our country is going to be."

And, with an eye firmly set on the future, Chief La Barge also looked in the rearview mirror, noting York Region and its police force has changed dramatically since his first day of work Oct. 9, 1973.

"The community was a lot more innocent than it is today," he said.

York was a largely rural community and, while there were a couple of murders every year, police officers mostly dealt with property crime, he said.

There also weren't any female police officers.

Two experienced officers were hired from Toronto in 1975, one of whom stayed.

The chief's wife, Det.-Sgt. Denise La Barge, now a 32-year police veteran, was the first female recruit hired by York police. She retires in February.

Today, women comprise 17 per cent of the York force.

But, as the force has changed, Chief La Barge said the force changed with it.

During the past 37 years, he has seen an explosion in growth, especially in the region's south end and a tremendous increase in diversity.

"It wasn't like we woke up one day and that had happened," he said.

Police technology has also radically changed over the past 37 years with the introduction of helicopters, thermal imaging and laser/radar for traffic enforcement, he noted.

"We have fantastic tools that simply didn't exist in those days," he said.

Chief La Barge mentioned the 1984 death of Const. Douglas Tribbling, who was shot and killed after responding to a routine alarm call in Markham, as case that has stuck with him throughout his career.

"That was a threshold moment in the history of York Regional Police because in many senses, we lost our innocence there," he said.

He is still unsatisfied that it appears the rights of the accused often outweigh the rights of victims. What's more, he is frustrated some repeat impaired drivers are not handed stricter sentences.

And, he had some advice for aspiring officers: "If you're not passionate about policing, please don't become a police officer," he said. "You have got to care."

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