

Public safety director helps good guys

City official says she enjoys Palmdale's 'engaged public'

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PALMDALE - For Anne Ambrose, running the city's public safety office is less about fighting the bad guys and more about helping the good guys.

"We tend to forget when there is crime in an area that the good still outweighs the bad," said Ambrose, the city's director of public safety and community relations.

Ambrose has been helping the good guys since 1997, when she took a part-time job as an administrative intern with the city's crime prevention unit. "I was at the right place at the right time," she said, noting that she found the job shortly after relocating to the Antelope Valley from Kansas with her husband, David. Their interstate move was prompted by her husband's acceptance of a new job with one of the Valley's largest aerospace firms.

At the city, Ambrose quickly advanced from part-time to a full-time crime prevention post and rose through the ranks under a variety of titles. In two years, she was running the department. Since 1999, that department has grown from a staff of about four to one with 22 full-time members, two part-time members and 31 temporary members who work as park rangers. At \$22.4 million, her latest public safety budget is smaller only than the one earmarked for the city's public works projects.

Ambrose's duties include departmental budgeting, overseeing the city's contract with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and implementing the city's emergency preparedness and response programs.

She and her staff also:

- Oversee the community service officer program that provides civilian assistants who work at the Palmdale Sheriff's Station in support of deputies.
- Manage the city's parking enforcement, park rangers and graffiti eradication programs.
- Implement crime prevention programs, such as the Neighborhood and Business Watch efforts.
- Run the Families In Action program, which provides educational courses that strengthen at-risk families.

Born in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, 39 years ago, Ambrose was not seeking a career in public safety, but now that she has found one, she wouldn't trade. "I love my job here. I've been with the city for most of my professional career, and it has by far been the best place I've ever worked," she said. "What we do does help shape this community. It helps shape how people feel."

Ambrose and her husband, both Ohioans, met while attending Kent State University. After their graduations and wedding, her husband accepted a job with an aircraft company in Wichita, and she found employment at Wichita State University. Armed with a bachelor's degree in applied conflict management, Ambrose became the university's workers' compensation administrator. In that post, she was responsible for managing claims filed against the school, making sure the institution met federal affirmative action regulations, resolving conflicts over complaints and injuries and training others to do the same tasks. "As the middle child between two brothers, you become the family mediator, so I think it was destiny" that led her to work in conflict management, Ambrose said.

"It was a really useful and helpful degree, especially when I started in this job and was going out and working in the neighborhoods," she said. There she would find people who didn't know how to resolve problems with their neighbors, Ambrose said. "There were a lot of times where we would go out ... and there were a lot of neighbor-neighbor problems that end up being law enforcement problems" or problems for city code enforcement or parking enforcement officers who get stuck in the middle handling retaliatory complaints filed by both sides, she said. "What we found is that if you give people the opportunity to sit down and talk with one another with someone mediating the conversation, they can find a resolution on their own where they are not having something imposed on them. And I think you find longer-lasting solutions that way," Ambrose said.

"So, having a degree in something my mother never thought I would get a job out of has really helped prepare me for this job," she said, chuckling.

This past year, Ambrose added to her skills by completing her studies for a master's degree in public administration.

Like the city's other department heads, Ambrose regularly attends the public meetings of the City Council to field possible questions or directions related to Palmdale's law enforcement efforts. "And sometimes I get the calls late at night when bad things happen," she said.

Because her husband is a civilian pilot, they are able to get away from the daily routine by renting a plane and flying to Big Bear Lake, Catalina Island, Las Vegas or another destination. "There are a lot of places you can get to within a couple of hours," Ambrose said. They also break away by taking local motorcycle jaunts or, when time permits, they return to Ohio to visit relatives or make longer trips to Europe under the right circumstances. "I'm pretty low-key," Ambrose said. "I've been doing a lot of crafting lately, scrapbooking, that kind of stuff." She also likes target shooting and running. When

time permits, she hones her weapons skills with either her .357- or .45-caliber handguns. "It's good for stress reduction," Ambrose said. "Occasionally - pretending I'll be a runner someday - I'll do a local 5K, but that's a work in progress," she said. "But that's about it. We're pretty much homebodies. "We have a 16-year-old dachshund/pound puppy mix, and we don't like to leave her at home too much," Ambrose said. Her dog, named Sage, "has been with us since the early days of our marriage."

"What I like about this city and working here is that there is really good interdepartmental cooperation. There probably isn't a department in this organization that we don't work with on a direct basis," Ambrose said. "What I like about the Antelope Valley and Palmdale is that we have an engaged public here," she continued. Hundreds of residents turned out to help plan and implement the city's Partners for a Better Palmdale anti-crime effort, and many have continued that participation by joining Neighborhood Watch programs, Ambrose noted.

"A majority of the people who have come here realize it's a nice community and an affordable place to live with a lot of really good resources," she said. "They are not willing to just stand by and watch it deteriorate. They don't want to settle for less. They want to be safe and are willing to step up with the city to make sure that happens."

"I work hand in hand with Capt. Bob Denham, our sheriff's station commander, to craft and bring forward our public safety strategy, and that's a great job. But it's not just about the bad guys," Ambrose said. "I think the thing I like most about our job is that we get to deal with all of the good people. The Sheriff's Department gets to deal with all of the bad guys. They put the criminals in jail. Our staff, we do things like crime prevention. We get to work with all the residents who are dedicated to this community and want to keep it safe," she said.

"So we get to see the other side of it. We get to see the optimistic side where the good outweighs the evil in the community. And we have tons of great, dedicated residents who just want to have a safe place and are willing to be involved in making it that way," Ambrose said. "We get to see the strong law enforcement efforts dealing with the really bad portions of our community and we get to work with those residents who are the good folks on the other side."

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