

HPD cadet learning to protect and serve



Photo by Dave Schafer

The first thing HPD cadets learn is the proper way to stand at attention. It's the beginning of HPD's six-month process of forming officers out of people from all walks of life.

By Dave Schafer

This is the first in a series of stories following HPD cadet Anne-Marie Pearson through the police academy.

0650, June 25 – “How is everybody?” Officer Durrell Dickens asks the 64 cadets who are as rigid as their pressed uniforms.

“Good, sir,” they say. Half the “goods” start on the others’ “sirs.”

With that, Anne-Marie Pearson’s new life begins. Pearson is smiling, her 5’10”, 150-pound frame seated behind an arched

table. Thick gray half-circles shadow her eyes – she didn’t sleep much last night – but those eyes shine with excitement.

She’s waited 20 years for this day. Ten years ago, she’d given up on seeing it. Now it was here, and it felt incredible.

“A few weeks ago, you all had jobs,” Executive Assistant Chief Charles McClellan says. “This is not a job. This is a profession.”

Pearson has worked enough jobs, always searching for more. Now, she believes she’s found it.

The birth of a dream

Pearson grew up watching “Adam-12,”

“Cagney & Lacey,” “CHiPs,” and other police shows. When she was a husky 10-year-old, a police officer responded after a man stuck his middle finger out at her. She sat in the front seat of the squad car, next to the shotgun. In high school, Mrs. Whatley’s retired FBI agent husband visited her government class and regaled students with his adventures. He made it sound so *cool*.

By then, Pearson wanted to make a difference in people’s lives. Now, she knew how.

She got a bachelor’s in sociology from the University of Texas in 1987 and applied to the Austin Police Department. But she couldn’t cross the monkey bars during the agility test. Every time she reached for the second bar, she fell off.

In college, she’d ran, swam a mile a day and lifted weights. But none of her college workouts involved the upper-body strength she needed now. Finally, she gave up and stood there embarrassed. The recruiters’ images floated in her tears.

She was unable to comprehend what had happened. But it was just a little setback. “Wait six months, train a little bit, then come back and try again,” a recruiter told her.

She never returned.

The death of a dream

While she waited the six months, Pearson went bankrupt, the result of her yearlong

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Capt. Mary Lentschke welcomes Anne-Marie Pearson, left, and other cadets to the academy.

involvement in a multilayered marketing scheme that stayed just this side of legal. Law enforcement agencies won't hire people with bad credit, so now she had at least a seven-year wait.

She moved back in with mom and dad and built up her credit.

In 1995, she applied to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. She passed the group interview, the physical, the psychological tests, even the agility test, and her recruiter said they just needed a spot to open at the academy in Quantico, Va.

Her dream was about to come true. She stayed away from friends who smoked pot, quit her job, and prepared to move at a moment's notice.

That spot at Quantico never opened. The DEA froze hiring. They lost her paperwork. When they found the paperwork, more than six months had passed, so she needed to retake the tests.

Now 33, she told the recruiter never mind.

Then she hung up and sat on the floor crying, her salty tears spilling out her lifelong dream.

The regrowth of a dream

The next day she prepared to find a new life with the fulfillment she'd imagined

would come from law enforcement.

But no matter what job Pearson took, she felt like a square peg trying to shove herself into a round hole. She was aimless and unfocused.

Then, late in 2006, Pearson saw a news report that HPD needed recruits and had raised the age limit for cadets to 44. She was 42.

"Why don't you try?" her roommate asked. "It can't hurt."

Can't hurt? Hadn't it already ripped out her heart?

She jotted down the phone number. The next morning, she called just to see where it would lead.

On Jan. 17, she passed the civil service exam. Then she passed the mental and physical tests. She started getting excited.

Officer Paul Singleton told her he had to do a background check and get her academy admittance approved. Routine stuff. She was almost there.

She'd heard that before.

Doubts crept in. What was she doing? Was she crazy? This was going to change her life. Was she too old?

She waited. For Singleton's call welcoming her to the force. But also for the other shoe to drop, to learn that her dream was again being choked to death.

Then, on May 30, the little window on her cell phone's face informed her she had a voice mail message.

"I've got good news," Singleton's familiar voice said. "Please give me a call back."

When she did, he told her Cadet Class 193 started June 25. Be there.

She nodded into the phone, relieved and weary.

The dream becomes reality

The first week of class is about changing how cadets live, said Lt. Greg Ware, in charge of cadet training.

It's ordered and uniform. It's pressed white shirts and polished black shoes that bounce the light back. It's cadets learning

to control themselves before they learn to control others.

Ware anticipates six to 10 cadets in Pearson's class won't graduate. Some will decide this semi-military life isn't for them. Others will have that decision made for them. Many of those will fail during the first 11 weeks, which are spent in the classroom.

During first-week assessments, Pearson passed push-ups, the 300-meter sprint and the 1.5-mile run. She was assigned to remedial classes in trigger pull, high jump and the agility run. That will make her days longer and her lunches shorter.

She takes it with good humor and high spirits.

"Yeah, it's a challenge, and it's tough, but it's fun," she said. "I've been looking for a challenge for years.

"This is what I've wanted my whole life. I'll do whatever it takes."

"You are competing for a job," Ware told the cadets their first morning as city of Houston employees. They won't be HPD employees until they are sworn in the day of graduation in January. "What you are trying to do is earn the right to wear this blue uniform. You will have to earn it. We don't give this blue uniform away.

"If you graduate from here, you should be real proud of what you accomplished."

For Pearson, getting here was an accomplishment. Now comes the real challenge.

Want to keep up with cadet Pearson?

Check out her weekly blog updating her trials, tribulations, and victories at www.citysavvy.org.

Watch HTV's "Academy 193," which will follow Pearson and six other cadets through four weeks of the academy. Check HTV listings for air times.

HPD cadet goes back to school

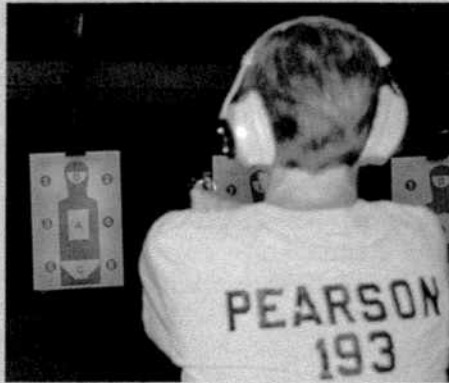


Photo by Dave Schafer

HPD cadet Anne-Marie Pearson practices firing a handgun during cadet training. Pearson is one of 60 cadets in Class 193.

By Dave Schafer

This is the second in a series of stories following HPD cadet Anne-Marie Pearson through the police academy.

Among tomorrow's police officers, the blue ribbon, one-inch wide, one-half inch tall, and framed with gold, is a mark of accomplishment. Cadet Ann-Marie Pearson wears it above the left breast pocket on her white polyester shirt.

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She earned the ribbon and later the gold star pinned in the middle for scoring the highest marks on two tests. Both times she tied Eduardo Martinez, who also got the highest score on a third test.

"I've always done well academically," said Pearson, who hadn't been in a classroom in 20 years. Pearson, 42, signed up for the academy 10 years after giving up her dream of being a police officer. (See the Summer '07 City Savvy.) "It wasn't the academics that worried me. It was the physical demands."

Once or twice a week, she and the other 59 remaining members of Class 193 run or do circuit training. But the first 11 weeks of the academy is about sitting in a classroom learning the penal and

family code, some Spanish, about family violence, properties of illegal drugs, how to fill out reports, and more.

"The classroom learning is the basis for everything we do," said Officer Durrell Dickins. "You can't teach them how to shoot until you teach them when to shoot."

Saturating their minds

"The academy is stringent," said Lt. David Fausek, who took charge of cadet training in July. "The information we teach in 28 weeks would take several college semesters."

Pearson had no idea officers went through all this.

"The instructors are up there vomiting information, and you just hope to catch it all," she said. "It's overwhelming at points. My mind is just saturated when

I get home."

After the nine-hour days, she has at least another hour of organizing her notes and getting her uniform ready. Then there's studying for tests.

"I've spent all day Sunday studying, with just a few mental breaks," Pearson said. "This isn't like having a nine-to-five job."

Pearson's housework gets shoved to the weekends, claiming chunks of her free time. In the back of her mind, she knows it's only temporary – the class graduates Jan. 9 – but "sometimes it's hard to remember that."

Much of the academy material is common sense, she said.

The instructors make sure those who want to learn and improve do, Pearson said.

Out of her seat, on her feet

Skills training began in week 12. That will give insight into the cadets' capability, Fausek said.

"I've enjoyed the classroom learning, but I'm looking forward to doing something other than sitting in the classroom eight hours a day," Pearson said. "I know books, but I don't know how to shoot, handcuff or pursuit drive."

Classroom learning isn't over. Skills training is text-based, and the cadets return to the classroom after skills training to learn more laws and procedures.

"Everything will start to fall into place then," Pearson said. "The last part of the academy is learning how to put all of the pieces together."

"It should be very interesting."

Cadets get sense of crime scenes



Photo by Dave Schafer

Rholanda Johnson throws Ramon Escamilla to the mat during defensive tactics training at the HPD academy. During the second half of the six-month training, cadets learn how to handle life-like scenarios.

By Dave Schafer

This is the third in a series of stories chronicling the cadets of police academy Class 193.

The defense attorney is on the attack, twisting Carlos Ayala's words.

"So, because my client was cold and wanted somewhere warm to sleep, you arrested her for burglary? The only requirement for doing that was that she has to be found inside a place?"

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"No, sir, that's not what I said," Ayala responded. "The definition of burglary is when someone enters a place illegally and"

"Yeah, yeah, right," the attorney said. He won't let Ayala finish, won't let him say that burglary also has to involve the person moving something that doesn't belong to her. Like the radio that had been found on the ground just inside the door, or the gun in the suspect's waistband.

"How many misdemeanors do you have to turn into felonies before HPD gives you a medal? How many felony arrests per week do you have to average before you get a pay raise?"

Ayala doesn't bite. He stays calm, in control, a little smile tugging at the left corner of his mouth. "None, sir. HPD doesn't operate that way."

"Yeah, right. You said you went in there to find a burglar."

"No, sir, I didn't say that."

"Right," the attorney barks.

The report describes the suspect as a black woman in her late 30s or early 40s, but sitting in the defendant's chair is a white, 40-year-old man with a wide frame.

The defense attorney is Assistant District Attorney Joe Owmbly, and Ayala is wearing the pressed white shirt of an HPD cadet. They are role-playing, an exercise for Ayala and other cadets of academy Class 193 to understand what happens when they have to testify in a case.

"We want to see how they handle stress, if they stick to their story under attack, if they have confidence in their report," said Officer Robert Segovia. "The credibility of the department and the case starts with those officers on the streets, who are the first to arrive at a scene."

Ayala gave thorough and complete answers – when allowed – and wasn't baited into any case-breaking mistakes. It's the first time he'd ever testified in a case.

"I never would have expected to be attacked like that," he said.

It's all part of molding a strong police

force.

At the academy, instructors give cadets as thorough, life-like training as they can in a controlled setting. That training takes many forms.

Pursuit driving

The sound can be heard across the academy campus: *squeeeeeeeek ... errrrggggg*.

Squealing tires. Smoke from the burning rubber of the tires wafts into the air as cadets hit the brakes while rounding bends on one of two driving courses.

Between the squealing tires comes the *bang, bang, bang* of guns firing in the firearms range located in a hill next to the driving course.

There's another sound heard a lot here: the word, "fun."

"That was fun," said cadet Anne-Marie Pearson, who City Savvy followed through her first three months of training.

After zooming around the course, cadets have a split second to veer to the right or left of the cones at the finish line,

depending on which direction the green arrow overhead points. Then they slam on the breaks – there's that sound again – and have to stop before hitting more cones.

"The car wasn't easy to control, but it was fun," Pearson said, a big smile filling the bottom half of her face. A month later, she dropped out of the academy for personal reasons.

Defensive tactics

Rholanda Johnson grabs the man by the left wrist and slams her right forearm into the back of his left bicep. At 5 foot, 7 inches and 140 pounds, she's giving up three inches and 80 pounds. But when she pushes, he nosedives into the floor.

She crouches down, her left hand flat against his back, pinning him down, his left arm secure in her grip. Sweat darkens her gray T-shirt around the collar and under the armpits.

He's immobilized, ready for arrest. So Johnson stands up, lets him get off the wrestling mat, and does it again. Then they switch positions.

"I was never a physical person. I've never even been in a fight," Johnson said.

Throwing him isn't that hard. He's resisting, but they're only going half speed.

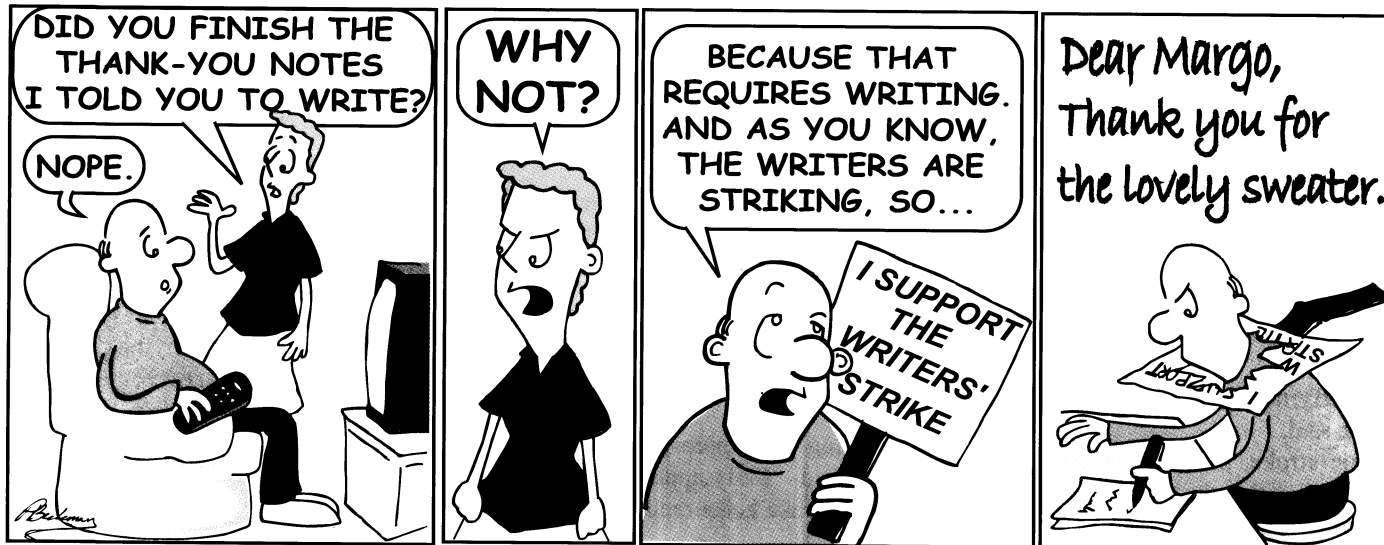
"Do not go even 75 percent because you will pop out a shoulder or elbow," instructed Officer Stephen Turner.

Of the more than 1,100 hours cadets spend in training, only 64 are spent in the gym learning defensive tactics.

"We just teach them the basics," said Sgt. Billy Barron. "We hope they remember the techniques, and we feel that they get the training to do that."

"I was struggling at first, but after a while I got comfortable with being able to disarm," Johnson said. "I feel like it's

Beckhead by Paul Beckman



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something I can definitely do out in the field when the time comes.”

After the defensive tactics test comes the ungraded Redman exercise, when an instructor covers himself in red padding and the cadet brings him into compliance.

It’s an exercise that brings together everything the cadets learned over the past five months. At full speed, they run an obstacle course. Then, using first their baton then their dummy firearm, they go all out to subdue the Redman.

“This is as close to a real-life, worst-case scenario as we can get,” Barron said. “It lets them know how they’ll react in a high-stress situation, and where they stand with their physical fitness and training.

“It teaches them their limits, so they can work to improve them.”

Field training

On the stand, Ayala described one of six field instructors stage during training.

It started with Ayala and his partner, Michael Arrington, driving around the parking lot when the call came over the radio to investigate a possible burglary at Montana’s Hardware. At the scene, actually the academy’s gym, Ayala and his partner talked to an instructor playing the storeowner.

“The instructors know what they should do or say to challenge the cadet,” said Officer Jorge Gaytan. “We’re trying to force them to control their emotions.”

Cadets respond to the four most common calls: burglary, burglary in progress, theft, and disturbance, each scenario occurring in an area on the academy campus.

“We try to make it as realistic as possible,” Gaytan said. “This is one of the most progressive field training programs in the nation, and we’ve seen that it’s effective.”

Only three weeks left until they become HPD officers, and 54 cadets remain from the original class of 64.

HPD cadets no more



Photo by Dave Schafer

Elisabeth Blanton shakes Officer Durrell Dickens' hand before walking on stage to get her officer's badge pinned on by Police Chief Harold Hurtt. After six months of training, 54 members of cadet Class 193 graduated at the police academy Jan. 9.

By Dave Schafer

This is the last in a series of stories chronicling the cadets of police academy Class 193.

They ran this floor countless times over the past six months, pumping closer to realizing a dream with each step. Running circles in the academy gym, once, twice, thrice, until sweat dampened the gray T-shirts that stated their last names above the numbers 193.

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This time, though, they march over the carpet in crisp precision, taking the final steps to becoming the newest members of the Houston Police Department.

It's graduation day for Class 193.

"For our cadets, tonight marks the end of civilian life and the beginning of a new life as a Houston police officer," says Capt. Mary Lentschke. "The journey to this point was not easy. It wasn't meant to be easy."

The cadets leave training in pomp and circumstance, the gym overflowing with friends and family in their Sunday best.

"Over the past six months, we tested their knowledge, we challenged their endurance, and we worked to instill a sense of pride and commitment in their service to our community," Lentschke says.

Fifty-four finish the journey, 10 fewer than started it. One who didn't make it was Anne-Marie Pearson, featured in the summer and fall '07 City Savvy issues. She dropped out for personal reasons.



Photo by Dave Schaefer

Cadets run the track during physical assessment on the third day of academy training. Cadet Ramon Escamilla and 53 other cadets graduated in January.

"While law enforcement is still an interest, I have realized that it is no longer something I need to fulfill or define me," she wrote.

"Class 193's exceptional performance can be attributed to not only the instruction, training and support they received at the academy, but also to the character and commitment of each member of the class," Lentschke says.

The cadets range in age from 21 to 42. Fifteen are from the military. Fourteen have family in law enforcement. Twenty-five have a bachelor's degree and six an associate's degree. Three are from Mexico, four from Vietnam.

"There aren't that many ways that you can make a living and make as much of a difference as in law enforcement," Mayor Bill White says. "This is a special opportunity."

In the second row of cadets facing the stage, her back to the audience, Rolanda Johnson sits with her hat in her lap. All her 23 years she's dreamed of being an officer. She's overwhelmed and nervous, but that's good, she thinks.

"When you put on that uniform, you're an authority figure, no matter your age," White says. "The people around you will see the uniform and expect you to be an authority figure. If you try to meet their expectations, you will be an authority figure, and it will have nothing to do with the uniform."

When she came to Houston three years ago, Megan Lares began noticing how the community treated its police officers, like they were special.



Photo by Dave Schaefer

Class 193 eats lunch together in the academy cafeteria.

She wanted to be a part of that.

"More than most jobs, the police officer can be under a microscope," White says. "How you conduct yourself on this job, and often how you conduct yourself when you're off duty, will be subject to a level of scrutiny that you have not experienced. If you allow yourself to meet the high expectations placed on you, you'll find that this day is not just transformational in your career, but also in your life. And we will all benefit because of that."

Carlos Ayala always felt the need to help others. When he heard HPD was hiring, it fit.

"This is not just any job," Chief Harold Hurtt says. "This is your life. This is a way of life. The only way you will gain respect is by your behavior, conduct and professionalism."

Scott Nguyen also has always wanted to help others. Early on, the academy's military-type style, the saluting, the marching, the rigid attentions, annoyed him. It was laughable. Now, he doesn't find it funny. Now, he sees a change in himself. It's called discipline.

"Life as a police officer is different," says Justice Sam Nuchia, a former HPD

chief. "Your life will never be the same. For most of us, it's gotten into our blood."

After 20 years in the Air Force, joining the police department seemed a natural next step for Richard Araiza. There were some tough times during training, but determination and inner strength kept pushing him.

"Treat everyone, no matter who they are, as you would want someone to treat your brother, sister, husband, wife," Nuchia says.

Family. That's important to James Butterfras. Thoughts of his family pushed him through six tough months of mental and physical tests. He's always wanted to help people, and he now feels that he'll be doing that on the best police force in the world.

"There are many temptations in the world, and it may seem like we make no difference. But we, Class 193, promise to remain true to our mission," says class president Brandt Owens.

Robert Watson spent years working in retail monotony. Here was a chance to do something different each day, something exciting.

After the badges are pinned on – most by family members in HPD or other police departments – the cadets recite the oath of office.

Then Noah Dancer takes the stage. After a short career in the Marines, he became a corrections officer. Then he heard HPD's call.

"For the last time, Class 193, DISMISSED," he barks.

The crowd erupts in cheers and surges forward to embrace their family members, their newly minted figures of authority, the newest members of HPD.

Their heroes.