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Interview with Deborah Linden

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Deborah Linden

INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH LINDEN

San Luis Obispo Police Chief

Deborah Linden is a native Californian. She attended UC Santa Barbara, and graduated in 1984 with a BA degree in sociology. She began her law enforcement career with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department as a deputy sheriff at the age of twenty-two and served in a variety of assignments during her eighteen-year tenure there. She was hired by the City of San Luis Obispo as the chief of police on January 1, 2003. She holds a master's degree in leadership and is a POST Command College graduate. In 2004, she was appointed to the California Commission on Peace Officer

Standards and Training (POST) by Governor Schwarzenegger and was reappointed for a second term in 2007. She has taught at Santa Barbara City College, Allen Hancock Law Enforcement Academy, and St. Mary's College. Among her activities with many community and non-profit groups, she serves on the boards of the Anti-Defamation League, Transitions Mental Health Association, and the Monday Rotary Club in San Luis Obispo. She also serves as the law enforcement representative on the new Homeless Services Oversight Council. She is married with two adult stepsons who live in California.

Moebius: What attracted you to your job? What are your fundamental goals?

DL: I had a great and rewarding career with the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Department but came here because of the great reputation of the San Luis Obispo Police Department. I wanted to continue the excellent work that was already being done while further enhancing the department's effectiveness. For example, we have worked really hard to increase collaboration with other city departments, businesses, and community organizations. We have worked diligently to increase our partnership with student leaders from Cal Poly and Cuesta. Students are members of our community, and we want to work with them to solve issues that come up. We subscribe to a community policing philosophy, which means working in partnership with members of our community to pro-actively solve problems and prevent crime.

Moebius: How would you describe your department's approach to working with college students?

DL: We outreach to and collaborate with Cal Poly and students very frequently. We have collaborated with student leaders on how to stop dangerous events like Mardi Gras. We present at Open House, WOW [Week of Welcome], and other events to interact in a positive way. We also work closely with UPD [University Police Department] on a daily basis and on grants to address student alcohol abuse and other issues. We have representatives on Cal Poly's SAFER committee [Sexual Assault Free Environment Resource] and we work with SARP [Sexual Assault Recovery and Prevention Center]. We work with ASI [Associated Students, Incorporated] on a range of issues and are active members

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of the Student Community Liaison Committee to facilitate communication among Cal Poly, Cuesta, and the city and county of San Luis Obispo. We also have programs to help solve problems without police involvement, such as SLO Solutions, a conflict resolution service that is free to SLO residents to help mediate conflicts between neighbors or roommates, among other issues.

Moebius: Some people describe a person's college years as a time of inquiry and experimentation, which, by its definition, involves challenging or violating established rules. Your role is often characterized as one imposing order and regimentation. Is this dichotomy accurate from your perspective?

DL: To me, when you talk about college years as a time of inquiry, I see it as a time to meet people you would not otherwise have the opportunity to meet, learn things you would not otherwise have the opportunity to learn, and become involved in one's community. There is certainly a social aspect to this - I was a college student at UCSB and lived in Isla Vista, so I'm very aware of the importance of social interaction and relationships in one's college experience. However, it seems that excessive partying and dangerous drinking has become ingrained in the student culture and has become an expectation for students. To me, this is very different from students finding their way in a time of inquiry and experimentation. Over the past twenty-five years, I have seen "inquiry" become equated with "excessive drinking and partying," which creates a very dangerous situation for students. If alcohol is used legally and reasonably, it is not a problem for the students or for us. When it is abused in a way that negatively impacts the participants or the community around them, such as neighbors, friends, or others, it leads to consequences that are detrimental not only to a student's academics, but to their health and safety. This is what we see in the student culture, and it is very different from a "time of inquiry."

I would not characterize our job as "imposing order and regimentation," rather we keep the community safe. We have laws enacted by our state and our city that establish social norms and are intended to protect communities and people from unacceptable risk, danger, or impact on the community. Enforcement of the law is a primary component of what the police do, but there are many other aspects to our work as well, such as outreach and prevention and general problem solving.

Moebius: Why do you think there is so much alcohol misuse among college students?

DL: I have a real concern that the student culture regarding alcohol has morphed into something that is not healthy for anybody, either our students or other members of our community. The national statistics concerning college students who die, fail academically, are sexually assaulted, are injured or commit crimes because of alcohol are alarming. Some students come to college with an expectation that this is how they are supposed

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to behave. I don't accept this. These students are incredibly bright, and they should not be settling for an expectation that puts themselves and others at risk. Reaching students to explain the difference between having a drink or two in a social setting and really high risk, dangerous drinking can be very difficult. When you are eighteen, nineteen, or twenty years old, and think nothing can happen to you, it can be hard to communicate this. Then there is a tragedy like Carson Starkey's death which increases the sense of urgency to get the message through to students that this can, and does, happen to them.

We have to recognize that alcohol and liquor companies are targeting college and high school students with their promotions and advertising, such as the Spring Break events that are funded by alcohol companies and promote college students to go somewhere to get really drunk and party. The "Under 4" social norming campaign at Cal Poly, for example, was funded by Coors, and I have a big problem with that. Not all students participate in the drinking and partying, but there is a lot of pressure on new students to drink and party.

Moebius: How would you describe the state of "town/gown" relations in San Luis Obispo?

DL: It is a work in progress and it always will be. It can be difficult. Our permanent residents are very frustrated because of the continual partying and noise in the neighborhoods, which has caused tension between student and non-student neighbors. We need to keep working on these issues and find new strategies to address these problems. The lifestyles of students and non-student neighbors often conflict; students may be partying and their neighbors might have a baby or have to go to work early. Some residents have dealt with this for so long that even if a group of students is respectful, the neighbors may call the police right away because they are so frustrated. So we want to work on helping with communication and solving problems. When students come with a "right to party" attitude, this can be really tough. We work on both sides.

The City Council has received a great amount of feedback and concern from residents about the effects the excessive partying has had on their lives. So, the council directed the Police Department to implement stronger legal measures, such as ordinances addressing noise and unruly gatherings, in order to address these issues. We have a clear directive from the council to reduce noise and party-related violations. Within these parameters, we are working with several stakeholders, including neighborhood residents and ASI leaders, to create and implement various strategies.

Moebius: Does the percentage of college-age residents in San Luis Obispo affect your allocation of resources?

DL: Yes, mostly because it drives the alcohol issues. We spend an inordinate amount of resources policing noise and party violations in the neighborhoods and addressing problems associated with the bars and nightclubs downtown. Alcohol related crime,

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including serious incidents such as assaults and overdoses, is higher here than in similarly sized cities without the large bar concentration or student population. This creates a strain on already scarce police resources, especially when officers are taxed with policing the party activity in the neighborhoods and downtown during the same time periods.

Moebius: Can you provide examples of opportunities you have because of the high percentage of college-age students in San Luis Obispo?

DL: I love working with college students. They bring vibrancy and vitality to our community. There is great opportunity to tap into the intelligence and energy of students to do internships and volunteer work in our community and with the police department. For example, my department is working with Cal Poly students to conduct a scheduling study as part of their senior project. We partner with students, including fraternities and sororities, on community service projects. Our SNAP Program [Student Neighborhood Assistance Program] employs students to address low-level noise and code violations with an educational approach.

Moebius: What do you enjoy most about your job?

DL: I work with some of the most honorable and dedicated people imaginable, and the work we do is meaningful and important. When this career is done and I retire, I will be able to look back and know I made a difference in people's lives in a very meaningful way. I'm living a life of purpose—what more could I ask from my career. \bigcirc

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Adrienne Miller, Winter 2010.