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'Nothing is the same every day'

On patrol with Tillamook County Sheriff's Deputy Matt Kelly

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Matt Kelly

TILLAMOOK - Matt Kelly took a sip of his first Diet Coke of the night.

"Everything's a little strange," he said glibly in answer to a question about the strangest incident he'd seen.

Kelly grew up in North County with a younger sister who now lives near Nehalem. He joined the Air Force shortly after graduating from Neah-Kah-Nie High School, becoming a security policeman. But the assignment, he said, was his third choice - he really wanted to become a paramedic. And his career in law enforcement, albeit accidental, began.

After seven years in the Air Force, including a tour in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War, Kelly returned to Tillamook County. He began working at the Tillamook County Emergency Communications District and signed up for the Tillamook Police Department's reserves program. He later became a city police officer. And in 2001, Kelly began working as a sheriff's deputy.

"That's what the military trained me to do and it kind of stuck," he said with a ready grin.

Kelly usually works as a traffic officer, riding a motorcycle. He takes pride in keeping motorists safe by making DUII arrests. And he almost always works nights.

"I'd rather stay up until 5 a.m. versus getting up at 5," he said, opening his second bottle of Diet Coke.

And after 10-hour shifts, he returns to his Central County home, which he shares with two cats, Emmett and Miss Priss. But Kelly remains on-call until the next shift begins, and said he often gets called back out to work shortly after returning home.

On this chilly March night, Kelly was on patrol, ready to take calls in addition to watching for impaired drivers. He said he enjoys his job, with its hodgepodge of crimes and crashes.

"Nothing is the same every day," he said with the cruiser's radio playing '80s music in the background.

The night, however, passed without what he described as the "fun part" - the excitement of emergency calls and high-speed driving. Instead, it was punctuated by a handful of traffic stops. Kelly turned the heat in his cruiser up against the chill of the night as he drove the roads of South County, shining his spotlight on beaches and parking lots, watching for signs of trouble.

Kelly said his sense of humor, which he described as sarcastic, is necessary for officers. He recalled helping two other deputies catch a man wanted on a warrant after the man swam across a South County river. And, strangely, he said he has found several amorous couples on the county's boat ramps.

But the job also holds inevitable dangers. He still sports an indentation on his forearm where a teen boy who was high on methamphetamine bit him during an arrest. And while violent crime may not be as frequent in Tillamook County as it is in larger cities, deputies still face hazards.

"For us, it's a one-man show," he said. "You're on your own for longer. You learn to talk people down."

At about 3 a.m., Kelly stopped at a Tillamook convenience store for his third Diet Coke of the night. And with his shift nearing its end, he slid through the gates leading to the back door of the Sheriff's Office.

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