

Post-secondary safe and secure: a day in the lives of peace and security officers who patrol the NAIT, U of A and MacEwan campuses

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Post-Secondary Safe and Secure

A day in the lives of peace and security officers who patrol the NAIT, U of A and MacEwan campuses

By Kaylen Small



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TUDENTS PASS them in the halls every day and don't give them a lot of thought. As intimidating as they can sometimes appear in their uniforms, they're not here to make enemies. They are the women and men who do their jobs so students don't have to think twice about feeling safe and secure while pursuing education.

As the first responders on campus, security officers face a vast and complex array of situations: door access, locker cuts, thefts, stalking, public intoxication, suspicious

persons, medical emergencies and distress calls, to name a few. They're ready to go all day, every day. Each hour is different; every situation is unique.

As Security Officer James Flood says, "You can go months without having a call that's going to be exciting to some people, or you can have 12 in a day."

Security departments at Edmonton's three major post-secondary institutions – NAIT, University of Alberta, and MacEwan University – make the safety of students their main priority. NAIT and U of A have peace officers, and MacEwan has security officers. The biggest difference between the titles is where they get their respective powers and what can be enforced. A peace officer is appointed by the province (the Peace Officer Act of Alberta) and a security officer gets authority from the Security Services and Investigators Act. Security officers can still enforce certain laws but are more limited in what they can legally enforce.

Under a recently renewed three-year contract, U of A Protective Services assists NAIT in its campus policing and security. A U of A inspector goes to NAIT, acting as a go-between for patrol operations and senior management, allowing for enhanced services, including investigations, if necessary. While NAIT has varied schedules, 12-hour shifts are the norm, starting at 7 a.m. and p.m. (U of A) and 6 a.m. and p.m. (MacEwan) with days off in between (two days on, one off, two nights on, four off, for example).

Officers take their jobs seriously, but they're human, too. In their off hours, some coach football, others tan and hit the gym, and others look after their children.

Officers have to be assertive and firm, and yet personable and patient. Being respectful goes a long way, too.

There's a lot to learn. This career is not for everyone.

NAIT

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HE MORNING starts with a call.

“Hey, can you guys come down to the arm-wrestling machine. There’s this guy. He doesn’t fit, and he’s battling it.”

NAIT Peace Officer Stephanie Harris, 24, acts out the scene, wildly yanking on the plastic hand of the arcade-style game in the campus S-wing.

“So, we come over and this guy is in the chair, and is probably 110 pounds, soaking wet,” she says. “You take a second to gather yourself, and be like, ‘Hey man, what’s up?’ ”

He was unhinged and pacing. The officers discovered that the police weren’t looking for him, Harris says, but he clearly had to be moved off campus.

“So, we’re like, ‘Hey man, what’s in your pockets?’ And he pulls out a needle, and this palm-sized rock, and puts them down. It was crazy. He was clearly strung out on something.”



NAIT Peace Officer Stephanie Harris, 24, tells the story of the deranged man who fought the arm wrestling machine.

It's crucial to be able to talk someone down, and that comes with practice, Harris says. It's about being calm and paying attention to your words, and theirs. They'll give you cues on what's upsetting them.

"I like the talk-down approach, since I am a smaller female," she says. "I'd way rather not get in a physical altercation ... He was kind of funny. He was like, 'I'll fight you!' I'm like, 'Man, just go.' And he was like, 'OK.' "

Officers gauge their response to the behaviour of the person in front of them, she adds.

"It depends if they respond better to a male or a female. Like, this guy– I was with (Peace Officer Jason Ollie), and he looked at Jay and was like, 'You're lucky your partner's got a vagina because I don't want to hit a woman.' "

Harris says that's the kind of thing she hears a lot. Other officers agree that being female has its pros and cons.

"There are some people that won't look at us because of (their) religion," Peace Officer Gina Swan, 27, says, noting that it doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's more likely in a group setting. "They look to our male partner for clarification. Or sometimes girls will want to talk to us more. They can relate to us. If you're on a call and she's upset ..."

"They're almost automatically drawn to us," Harris adds.

"They usually are like, 'I want to talk to her, I want to talk to her!'" Swan says.

The presence of female peace officers is something many female students take as a great comfort. Harris says it's because women are "not as imposing looking, perhaps." And that, she adds, "saves our bacon half the time."

But there's no such thing as an average day. When campus security officers say every day is different, they also mean that, in this job, it can be dangerous to get too comfortable.

"When people say, 'I was on a routine patrol' – I never use that because no patrol is routine," Harris says. "That's how officers get hurt ... Because they get into something like that and get complacent."

On a snowy day last year, Harris responded to a call from a woman on the emergency help phone.

"'They're out to get me ... 'I need someone to come help me right now!'"

"She has her crack pipe there. It was kind of freaky... She was twitching. We ended up arresting her, calling the cops, putting her in our car."

“As soon as we had her searched and in the car, someone got hit in the crosswalk across the street. So we were directing traffic and helping (the fire department) out for like two hours.

“And then we got a fire drill.”

Stress comes with not knowing how a situation is going to be resolved, Harris says. But those challenges are also the best part of the job.

As a Community Liaison Officer, Harris gets to know the people of NAIT and beyond. CLOs are given more time to go into offices and figure out the problem, whereas patrols mainly respond to calls – which are increasing for Harris and Swan because they’re building relationships.



NAIT Peace Officers Gina Swan, 27, and Stephanie Harris patrol the main campus, and have learned how to spot the students and the strangers.

“I like being that law-enforcement figure,” Swan says. “But I *love* being in the community.”

“If you are able to get people to trust you and like you, they’ll come to you with their problems,” Harris adds. “It’s much easier to solve a problem if you know there’s a problem in the first place.”

While she balances her roles as a patrol officer and a community liaison officer, Harris teaches a self-defence class and runs the department's Twitter account.

"I got my hands in a little bit of everything," she says, as her phone buzzes with Twitter notifications. "I kind of know everyone around and I love it."

As Harris walks down the halls, she greets the people she passes.

"I always try to have a smile on my face so that I do look a little bit more approachable than—" She makes a stern face.

"I'm kind of bad with names, so I'm good with faces. Like, if I've seen you, I'll be able to point you out and be like 'Hey, how's it going?' and I'll remember what kind of a dog you have, what you did over the summer."

Through dealing with people, Harris says she has picked up a useful approach to her job: framing things positively. You can make an instruction sound like an order, or you can make it sound like helpful advice. Harris says she prefers the latter.

"If you make it seem like you're doing something for the person, they're way more receptive to what you actually say."

Harris sees a woman smoking by the crosswalk, and doesn't hesitate. She greets the woman, informs her that NAIT is a no-smoking campus, and concludes with, "Have a nice day."

Harris picks her battles.

"Everyone gets one," Harris says. "I'll run your name in the system. If you're not in there, I'll be like, 'Don't do it again, because it's 287 bucks. Like, I just saved you half a pay cheque.'"

Ollie, 31, says he's never had a better partner than Harris. She offsets his flaws, and they feed off of each other, which results in strong cohesion. It's clear that the partners know each other well.

"If you boil it down, I spend half my life with the people I work with," Ollie says. "We're all one big family. We look after each other. We may not always see eye-to-eye, but at the end of the day, we're always going to be out there for one another's backs."

On the subject of Harris, he expresses respect for the way she has overcome her shyness to take charge in a very public job.

"One of her strengths is being able to command a presence and grab the attention of people," he says. "On the flip side of that, one thing she had to work on was being able to deliver her speech—"

Harris completes the sentence: "And not stutter, and repeat myself, and forget things."

When she started the job, two summers ago, Harris says, there were a few rocky moments, like the time she confused her codes and called in the wrong request to dispatch.

"Instead of asking them to run an ID check, I asked them to run a vehicle check. Then I got asked what the make and model was of the male standing in front of me. 'Ah ... white ... ah ... Caucasian male, of about six-two.'"

Voices instantly filled her radio.

"I was trying to deal with this guy, and then I pooped out my 10 code," she continues. "I'll never forget that. You make a mistake once, you feel stupid about it, then it never ... happens again. Ever."

University of Alberta

NOT VERY LONG ago, a woman spotted some things on Kijiji that looked like property that had been stolen from her. She reported it to U of A Protective Services, and they used that information to find the person who broke into a dozen lockers on campus.

“Theft is kind of a theme, unfortunately,” says Sgt. Marcel Roth, of University of Alberta Protective Services. Reports come in daily amounting to a “couple hundred a year.” It ranges from locker thefts to property left unattended or not secured properly.

Roth oversees the patrol operations day to day. He’s in the office most of the time, ensuring reports are accurate and complete to proceed to further investigation. On his whiteboard is a list of upcoming ones, from thefts to sexual assaults. In the last two years, sexual assault reports on campus have been on the rise. But Roth calls that a “bad-news/good-news story.”

“It doesn’t sound like a good thing, but I think what was happening in years past is we were only getting a very small amount,” Roth says. “It wasn’t that there wasn’t much of that activity going on, it’s just that it was never percolating, if you will, up to our level as far as a formal complaint.”

Roth wants survivors to know they have an organization they can report crime to, and resources like the sexual assault centre and counselling services.

“I think that a combination of those types of services and our quality of service has resulted in more reports of that nature,” he says.

He compares the stigma reduction in recent years to that of mental health. UAPS gets more calls about both now, Roth says. Even looking back at reports from a decade ago, the difference in how we deal with mental health is “night and day.” It’s not “noted” and “file concluded” any more.



With almost 25 years of service under his belt, Sgt. Marcel Roth now takes care of the administrative side of University of Alberta Protective Services.

In his almost 25-year career with UAPS, Roth says he has enjoyed the liberal and inclusive culture of the University. This allowed for him to complete a bachelor of commerce degree and an MBA there. While a recruit can be hired on a high school diploma, the more education, the better, he says.

“We weigh it that way, because we see a lot of synergy, if you will, between hiring people who have

been involved as a student in a post-secondary institution now working in a post-secondary institution.”

Outside work, Roth keeps busy with his family’s schedules. He says his son, 12, and daughter, 16, are a little confused about his job.

“It was easier when I was on patrol, because they could imagine what that was: patrol car, go patrol, and tell them neat stories every now and then. And now it’s like they don’t know what I do, because I do more administrative work. But I’ll just tell them the stories that everyone else is doing.”

UAPS works with police on a daily basis, and sometimes arrests are transferred to the Edmonton Police. The two services also share intelligence reports. Recently, city police sent their colleagues at U of A information on a person wanted for a robbery near campus.

“One of our officers happened to be looking for somebody else in the U of A hospital and saw the guy that the police were looking for sleeping in the emergency room,” Roth says. “So, we let him sleep, called the police, and sure enough, they got their guy. So, they look good; we look good.”

Recently, they worked with police again, when an off-duty officer was at the U of A South Campus and noticed something strange: a young man and woman parking a rather expensive vehicle.

“The female went into the ladies’ change room,” Roth says. “The male stood outside. Our off-duty officer felt that this was suspicious, that he looked like he was maybe a lookout for her – and that location does have increased thefts from lockers.”

The officer called UAPS and they spoke to the couple. It turned out that the vehicle was stolen. The police came down. The man, who had multiple warrants out for his arrest, was charged with possession of stolen property, and both were banned from the U of A by Protective Services.

“The police got their stolen vehicle back, and we got to close that file,” Roth says. “So that was a good one.”

In this field, a key quality is being able to communicate respect – whether it’s to someone who has been detained or someone who needs room access – Roth says. Through respect, he says, they get people to comply with the rules. Officers identify themselves, explain justification for talking to them, and then ask for co-operation. Sometimes, situations escalate to physical confrontation – which are few and far

between – but that can be avoided by communicating effectively, and making the grounds and ramifications clear.

For most students, a fine is an adequate deterrent to forbidden behaviour, Roth says. A \$250 ticket can buy a lot of textbooks or it can pay for a great Friday night. Sometimes, getting people to go along is as simple as letting them act as if compliance was their idea to begin with.

“If we can let them come up with the solution, even if it’s something we’ve provided them, then they feel like they’ve won,” he says. “And they save face, especially if they’re with a group of friends. Allowing them to save face.

“And that’s part of that respect.”

MacEwan University

A large, stylized, dark blue letter 'S' with a white outline, serving as a decorative element for the start of a paragraph.

SECURITY OFFICER James Flood was a 20-year-old student when he was hired to help ensure the safety and security of his fellow students at MacEwan’s City Centre campus.

“I was telling students just like me some things that they could and could not do,” he says. “And, then, a couple hours later, I’d be out of uniform and in the same class with them.”

Not everyone liked this – a situation that was somewhat complicated by the fact that he lived in residence, too. But, being a student gave him credibility in other ways.

“It gave me a perspective where I can tell people, if they happen to not agree with me, ‘I’ve been where you guys are,’ ” he says.

Flood began his police studies in Thunder Bay, Ont., and completed his criminal justice degree at MacEwan. All of his jobs have been geared towards becoming a police officer – from being a bouncer to working for G4S, one of the largest security agencies in Canada.

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do,” he says. “I’d much rather be running around in the guts of it than sitting behind a desk.”

First aid, CPR, and pressure point control tactics are required for what MacEwan calls security officer Nos. 1, who work as on-the-floor officers, as Flood does. As for fitness, officers have to run the Cooper test and Physical Abilities Requirement Evaluation (PARE) test – programs this department didn’t have when Flood started five years ago.

“It’s varied degrees in fitness here,” he says. “I know other institutions that have the peace officer program it’s a little bit higher. But we’re trying to get up to that level.”

Guards work in four teams of four – three security officers and one dispatcher per team. In addition to City Centre, guards are responsible for MacEwan’s other campuses: the Centre for the Arts and Communications, at Jasper Place, and Alberta College, near ATB Place.



MacEwan University Security Officer James Flood, 25, patrols past the Building 6 cafeteria.

“One of the main reasons why I got into any type of law enforcement is I really like the camaraderie with it,” Flood says. “Even though it’s to a much lesser extent than say, a peace officer or a police officer, it’s really nice to get to know somebody and knowing if something does go wrong, they have your back. It’s weird to describe it if you don’t know it, but it’s a cool feeling when you know you can trust them.”

Security isn’t the type of job where you go through training and then gradually ease yourself into the routine, Flood says.

“My first night, we had a car accident,” he recalls. “And it was a weekend, so we had residence in full swing.

“You have to remember, we’re expected to understand and know every portion of the University: where things are, where people can and can’t be, what you can and can’t do. It’s a lot to learn.”

The workload varies from night to night, he says. But there are patterns. For example, day shifts are busiest on Mondays, and night shifts are busiest closer to the weekend.

Day shifts and night shifts are as different as, well, night and day.

“Going into the weekend, you’ll start to notice that we’re dealing a lot more with university policies, dealing with students, doing patrols, having instructors come to you with maybe conflicts (like behavioural issues or grading disputes) they’re having inside with their own students or things like that,” Flood says. This involves interviewing the instructor (and likely, the student) to understand the student’s behaviour and implementing a plan to address it. Flood adds that officers may become involved if

the instructor is worried about her or his safety. “A lot more of the – for lack of a better word – exciting calls would be at our night shifts.”

As he walks around MacEwan’s perimeter and through the interior levels, Flood is listening to his earpiece. He says they always listen to make sure no one needs help, but he has learned to carry a conversation despite all the voices in his ear: Patrol vehicle back from winter maintenance ... Meeting called ... Officer patrolling building nine.

The dispatch centre answers calls constantly.

“We’ve had everything here, from students who have gotten themselves extremely hurt and we’ve followed blood paths to find them, to– We’ve had people on campus that the police happened to be looking for for warrants and things like that.”

The more common calls are for access controls (granting access to secure areas) and intoxication.

“We’re responsible for everybody’s well-being when they’re on our property, regardless of why they’re here,” Flood says.

MacEwan is different from the other local institutions, Flood says. It’s “smack dab” in downtown Edmonton, with nothing surrounding it.

“MacEwan in itself is a little city, and we’re like the law enforcement for that city. We have places where people live. We have stores. We have a bar. It’s all like a city. So

you try to get to know everybody because eventually, those are the people that are going to help you out if you need anything.”

Flood says he thinks MacEwan doesn't have a peace officer program because it used to be a community college – and it wasn't necessary then.

“But as MacEwan has grown, so has their needs for our department, security. I know that we are in the very initial stages of hopefully going there, but there's nothing concrete yet. So hopefully, very soon, we will actually be able to join (NAIT and U of A) in being peace officers. The difference is a lot more what they can enforce by the law.”

Either way, he says, the main reason he's at work is to ensure the safety and security of the 16,000-odd students and the many visitors who come to the campus every day.

“I know, a lot of times, people think that maybe we're here and trying to wreck the fun and everything. But it is honestly here for them and the staff to try and make it a place where you can be in downtown, central Edmonton and you still feel safe being here.”

Photos & video by [Kaylen Small](#)