

UC SANTA BARBARA

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THE PROFESSOR AND THE BAD MEN

Photo available on request

Reactions ran the gamut when University of California, Santa Barbara Professor of Communication Howard Giles announced that he wanted to devote some of his free time to working as a reserve officer with the Santa Barbara Police Department.

It was 1996, Giles was 50 years old and not only a tenured faculty member but the chairman of his department.

Some feared a mid-life crisis was on its way.

Others suspected a fit of whimsical lark.

Giles' wife, like the spouses of police officers everywhere, was simply afraid.

But there was one common thread, Giles remembers.

"I don't think there were very many people then who would have thought I'd still be at it," Giles said.

Well, at it he is.

And in a big way.

In February, Giles was competitively selected to the post of reserve sergeant, one of four on the Santa Barbara force.

Soon after, he was presented the department's reserve lieutenant's award for his service to the force in 1998.

Giles earned the award, in part, for playing the heavy in a variety of SWAT team scenarios.

"I was the bad guy," he said. "I was the one who got shot."

Giles was also involved in some undercover work that year, where real bad guys found his British accent -- he's a native of Bristol, England --disarming.

"They don't expect someone with this accent to be a police officer," Giles said.

Police work appeals to Giles in three ways.

"First, it's a way to give something back to the community," he said. "I feel lucky to be here as opposed to rainy old Bristol in England."

Secondly, he became an advocate of the value of law enforcement a few decades back while living in Montreal, Canada.

"They had a police strike," Giles said. "And I mean it was just mayhem."

And finally, there are aspects of police work that tie into his academic interest in inter-group communication.

"I am starting a new journal called Annual Review of Law Enforcement, Communication and Society,"

Giles said. "I am also working with some others on establishing a center for community and police practices."

As a reserve, Giles is committed to a minimum of one 10-hour shift per month and additional time devoted to training, which he fits in around his teaching, research and duties as assistant dean of the College of Letters and Science. And with his new police rank comes administrative responsibility for his seven-person squad.

His shift commonly involves crowd control duties such as for the annual Fiesta or July Fourth parades, or buddying up with a regular officer for patrol duties.

"We're basically backup," he said.

Backup, perhaps.

But with full police powers.

"A reserve can do much of what a regular officer can," Giles said. "Obviously, we're not as extensively trained."

As one who studies communication, Giles said he marvels at how skillfully regular officers can talk a potentially explosive situation to a peaceful resolution.

"I sometimes am surprised at what they do, but it is always highly effective," Giles said.

"They successfully deal with situations that we don't even have theories for."

Giles said his double identity has led to some interesting incidents. One afternoon in his campus office, he and an undergraduate student he had mentored celebrated her graduation with a chat and a congratulatory hug.

Later, he was walking a beat in uniform in Santa Barbara when he ran into the new grad and friends celebrating downtown.

Just as she was about to light up a celebratory cigar, Giles walked over and joked, "I don't think you should be doing that. It's bad for your health."

Unable to recognize her mentor as the man behind the badge, the flummoxed student apologetically put the stogy away.

Not until hours later, and another brush or two with the law did the student suddenly realize that the officer was Giles and that he was playing with her.

Giles finds that his work as a policeman complements his work as a professor and vice versa.

"I think my police work has actually enriched my academics in some ways," Giles said.

"It's made me appreciate the value of scholarly theory, rigorous evaluation and critical theory."

"I think it's kind of made me appreciate what I have here (at UCSB), too," he said.

Likewise, he's come to appreciate the kind of person it takes to be a good police officer.

"As the phrase goes, some of my best friends now are cops," Giles said. Content enough with his dual vocations is Giles that he intends to keep at both for the foreseeable future.

"Definitely," he said.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.