



Beyond the Badge

LAWPOA's Extending Reach

Having started nine decades ago to help female police officers, this organization has grown and aided law enforcement personnel reach their career goals

By Jorge Martin

In the nearly 90 years since the Los Angeles Women Police Officers and Associates (LAWPOA) first became an advocate for women's rights in local law enforcement, it has grown along with women's standing in the communities they serve.

Starting in 1925, LAWPOA was formed by the first female police officer in the LAPD and the third female police officer in the U.S., Alice Stebbins Wells, along with subsequent L.A. Policewoman Marguerite Curley, out of a desire to get fair treatment in regards to receiving raises and retirement benefits.

Over the years it has grown in great strides along with the women's movement of the '60s and '70s, and has been there as female officers received higher ranks within LAPD. Today, LAWPOA is a still-evolving organization that provides valuable training, scholarship opportunities and mentoring for law enforcement professionals, both sworn and civilian.

On March 20, at the Marriott Burbank Hotel and Convention Center, LAWPOA will host its annual symposium, where the featured topic will be "Sandy Hook - The Psychological Aftermath." This presentation will cover the effects on the Newtown, Conn. community after the fatal December 2012 shooting spree at the elementary school in this otherwise quiet town.

"In order to put on this symposium, [LAWPOA] want[s] to provide service



Officers pose with then-Police Chief Daryl Gates to display female police uniforms over the years. Changes to LAPD uniforms for women reflect the advances females made by way of attaining different roles in the Department (Mounted Unit and Air Support uniforms, for instance), as well as the consideration of inherent differences between men and women (maternity uniform, shown at far right).

and training for everyone," said Sgt. John Vasquez, the Third Vice President for LAWPOA. "Ultimately, everyone that comes out of that conference, what they learn ultimately benefits the community that they serve. The Department and the Los Angeles Police Foundation (co-sponsors of the LAWPOA Symposium) embraces this."

The importance of organizations like LAWPOA has grown along with the number of women in law enforcement.

In 1987, when LAWPOA President Cmdr. Regina Scott first joined LAPD, women made up less than 10 percent of sworn officers. At the close of 2013, that number had grown to 19.1 percent. In adding civilian personnel, that number jumps to 28.6 percent.

"The focus on the organization is promoting the status of women," Scott said. "Women in the Department

And the changes that LAWPOA has been a part of and seen take place through the years have been in some instances historic.

LAWPOA Through the Years

When Wells petitioned for and won the right to become the first female police officer in the United States in 1910, it was just the first step toward women becoming more equal to their male counterparts in the Department.

It was in 1925, just five years after women had received the right to vote in national presidential elections, that it came to a head that women on the police force were not being treated fairly in relation to receiving yearly pay increases. The idea of a pension was not even in the discussion.

"Alice Stebbins Wells went to bat and was told, 'You're not even considered and we might even do away with some of you,'" said Gail Ryan, a retired LAPD officer who is the official historian for LAWPOA. "She organized the women and started petitioning and rabble-raising and got on the ballot for a raise."

Wells did not feel right being elected LAWPOA's first president because she was also spending a significant amount of time traveling around the country

quite a bit of changes through those years. She noted that when she took her proficiency exam, it was a four-hour test that she later found out was the equivalent of what officers took in order to make detective. Men just had to take a 20-minute proficiency test.

LAWPOA helped in the Consent Decree lawsuit in 1972, which opened the door for women to be promoted past the rank of sergeant. It was a year later that the first woman was admitted to the LAPD Academy.

By 1975, Connie Speck was the first woman promoted to lieutenant. Five years later she was the first female captain in LAPD's history. Her sister, Sandra Hendricks, was the first sergeant on field patrol during the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Along the way these women, and so many others, received the backing of LAWPOA.

"That's why it originally started, to give the support and backing for the women," Ryan said. "If it wasn't for Alice and Marguerite, we might still be back there."

Ryan retired as a PIII after 33 years on the force and is quite proud of her career. As she has gone back to help chronicle the history of LAWPOA, Ryan has kept up with what it is doing for female officers today and is content to see the progress.



A Helping Hand

When Scott first joined LAPD in 1987, she was a single mother with a 7-year-old son and a 5-year-old daughter. Her new career was very important to her, but she also had to find a way to work being a mother into the mix.

When she became a member of LAWPOA in 1988, the early benefits she received came from the women who were already members.

"What it did was there were women who came before me who explained how to create that balance between doing your job and being a mother," Scott said. "Also, they made sure you took care of yourself."

As Scott has remained a loyal member through the years, and rose to president last year, she has seen LAWPOA aid young officers become established and eventually excel within the Department.

"We want to make sure that mentorship is established," Scott said. "In doing so, we also see that there are other members in the Department who are dealing with the same types of issues. We're making sure they're on track for their next promotion and knowing that they're a part of the future of the Department."

"They didn't always have the mentors and people who have already been where you want to go. There are already female sergeants, detectives, captains and even a deputy chief, if that's where you wanted to strive."

Making opportunities for advancement is a very important ideal for LAWPOA, and beyond the mentorship, there are scholarship opportunities for members to help them receive additional training and, in some cases, college degrees.

Capt. Roseira Moreno, the second vice president for LAWPOA, had a college degree, but saw an opportunity to go for a master's degree. It was only after she found out about scholarship and tuition reimbursement opportunities through LAWPOA that she went on to achieve her postgraduate degree in criminal justice at Cal State Long Beach.

"If I wouldn't have had the discounted tuition and the opportunities to get some of that reimbursed, first of all I probably would have been discouraged to attend because I had kids who were high school age at the time," Moreno said. "As a parent, you focus on your kids' needs before your own. But having that discount, I felt like I didn't have an excuse. I needed to go back and finish that degree."

Moreno has seen how these opportunities for additional training and attendance at seminars have helped many members of LAWPOA receive promotions. It's through the awareness of these available resources and the constant prodding of mentors to younger officers on their way up the ranks in the Department.

The goal of having a more well-trained and well-educated work force



LAWPOA's current board: Sgt. John Vasquez (third vice president), Leona Reed (sergeant at arms), CMDR Regina Scott (president), Capt. Roseira Moreno (second vice president) and Sonia Solis (treasurer). Not pictured: Ofcr. Beverly Beasley (secretary).

Seeing these officers achieve their promotional goals through continual education and training is very important to the members of LAWPOA, and it leads to a certain level of pride and satisfaction for those in elected posts.

"It's gratifying to know that we can assist them, and seeing them complete their education and say that they are a college graduate, and not just having some college education," Moreno said. "We want to promote the candidates to take the next exam, sworn or civilian."

Civilian members in LAWPOA are important, as those ranks continue to rise in numbers in the Department. Last year there were just fewer than 3,000 civilians in LAPD, and many have joined LAWPOA to receive the many benefits of membership.

Sonia Solis is a management analyst working in the Fiscal Operations Department in Downtown Los Angeles. She has been a LAWPOA member since 2008 and joined the board in 2012 as treasurer.

She echoes what other members say about how mentorship helps officers know about and strive for promotional opportunities, and she makes it a point to tell other civilian personnel that membership and attendance at symposiums and seminars are not solely for their sworn counterparts.

"I tell them, 'You get so much out of it,' Solis said. "The people who have gone in the past, they still talk about the speakers that they've had and they've been influenced in the past."

"Our focus for this year and going into next is trying to get more civilians involved."

Solis points out that what helps make LAWPOA more inclusive of all personnel is in the awards it presents. At the March symposium, dispatchers from LAPD, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties will receive awards for their efforts during the Christopher Dorner investigation last year.

"I like that they have their eyes on leaders who are good examples for other people to model themselves after," Solis said. "The leadership awards don't just target sworn

In the late 1990s, these yearly gatherings were called women's leadership conferences and female personnel were ordered to go.

Vasquez was invited to help organize and coordinate the conferences from 2004 to 2009. After Chief Charlie Beck was appointed as Chief of Police in 2009, Vasquez and former LAWPOA President, Dr. Deborah Gonzales, met with the Chief to discuss an idea that had to reimagine these events.

"We convinced Chief Beck to change these from a women's leadership conference to a training symposium for all, men and women, sworn and civilian," Vasquez said.

"It's keeping in Chief Beck's philosophy of training for all."

As these symposiums gained more attendees, the subject matter covered topics like bullying, addiction to pain medications or alcohol and suicide prevention. Agencies outside Los Angeles began to want to attend these events as well, including firefighting and paramedic personnel. This year members from agencies as far south as San Diego and as far north as Oakland are expected to attend. They do so because the subject matter is timely and comes from a unique perspective.

Vasquez used the Sandy Hook tragedy as an example for how they were taking a different angle. The initial reaction may be to want to hear about tactics in how

to handle an active-shooter situation. But in looking at the days, weeks and months that followed, they could see how a small town can help heal itself and recover from such a horrific event. Vasquez said the board asks itself a set of questions when setting the agenda for each symposium

"What's relevant? What's so pertinent to our jobs that we can serve our communities? What are the most

they have the reaction, 'Wow, this is the conference I need to come back to next year to see what they put on.'"

Vasquez, who reached 37 years with the Department on Feb. 14, is looking at future LAWPOA events that will have even further reach, with people from outside California attending.

"This is something that we can strive for," Vasquez said. "The topics are current and relevant. They're hard-hitting and instrumental in providing information that these folks need."

"The information that they get here, they're not going to get in the classroom in the academy or the roll-call instruction. Even though the Department has tremendous amount of information and training, when we have speakers who are experts in their fields, this information will be vital for them to receive."

During the rest of the year, LAWPOA will have training seminars that will cover subjects as wide-ranging as earthquake preparedness, nutrition and finance. It's the goal of this organization to foster an environment where continual learning will benefit its membership both at work and at home.

At its core, LAWPOA's mission is to help in the advancement of women in law enforcement, just like when it started in 1925. It will continue to emphasize mentorship, advanced education, networking and pursuing career advancement for all its members. Just getting sworn and civilian personnel to take part, even at the earliest stages of their careers, can be a critical aspect in nurturing a valued member in the law enforcement community.

"What I would say to the younger career officers, 'You don't get there by yourself,'" Scott said. "And you really need to build two types of networking: peer networking, where you can reach out to and ask different people. Also, reach out to people higher in rank who can help you promote to your next career."

"Our organization is as good as our members. We strongly encourage, if you're not a part of LAWPOA, to become a member and be a part of the future."

To find out more information and to register for the March 20 LAWPOA event, please visit lawpoa.org. ❖



