

HPD cadet learning to protect and serve



Photo by Dave Schafer

The first thing HPD cadets learn is the proper way to stand at attention. It's the beginning of HPD's six-month process of forming officers out of people from all walks of life.

By Dave Schafer

This is the first in a series of stories following HPD cadet Anne-Marie Pearson through the police academy.

0650, June 25 – “How is everybody?” Officer Durrell Dickens asks the 64 cadets who are as rigid as their pressed uniforms.

“Good, sir,” they say. Half the “goods” start on the others’ “sirs.”

With that, Anne-Marie Pearson’s new life begins. Pearson is smiling, her 5’10”, 150-pound frame seated behind an arched

table. Thick gray half-circles shadow her eyes – she didn’t sleep much last night – but those eyes shine with excitement.

She’s waited 20 years for this day. Ten years ago, she’d given up on seeing it. Now it was here, and it felt incredible.

“A few weeks ago, you all had jobs,” Executive Assistant Chief Charles McClellan says. “This is not a job. This is a profession.”

Pearson has worked enough jobs, always searching for more. Now, she believes she’s found it.

The birth of a dream

Pearson grew up watching “Adam-12,”

“Cagney & Lacey,” “CHiPs,” and other police shows. When she was a husky 10-year-old, a police officer responded after a man stuck his middle finger out at her. She sat in the front seat of the squad car, next to the shotgun. In high school, Mrs. Whatley’s retired FBI agent husband visited her government class and regaled students with his adventures. He made it sound so *cool*.

By then, Pearson wanted to make a difference in people’s lives. Now, she knew how.

She got a bachelor’s in sociology from the University of Texas in 1987 and applied to the Austin Police Department. But she couldn’t cross the monkey bars during the agility test. Every time she reached for the second bar, she fell off.

In college, she’d ran, swam a mile a day and lifted weights. But none of her college workouts involved the upper-body strength she needed now. Finally, she gave up and stood there embarrassed. The recruiters’ images floated in her tears.

She was unable to comprehend what had happened. But it was just a little setback. “Wait six months, train a little bit, then come back and try again,” a recruiter told her.

She never returned.

The death of a dream

While she waited the six months, Pearson went bankrupt, the result of her yearlong

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Capt. Mary Lentschke welcomes Anne-Marie Pearson, left, and other cadets to the academy.

involvement in a multilayered marketing scheme that stayed just this side of legal. Law enforcement agencies won't hire people with bad credit, so now she had at least a seven-year wait.

She moved back in with mom and dad and built up her credit.

In 1995, she applied to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. She passed the group interview, the physical, the psychological tests, even the agility test, and her recruiter said they just needed a spot to open at the academy in Quantico, Va.

Her dream was about to come true. She stayed away from friends who smoked pot, quit her job, and prepared to move at a moment's notice.

That spot at Quantico never opened. The DEA froze hiring. They lost her paperwork. When they found the paperwork, more than six months had passed, so she needed to retake the tests.

Now 33, she told the recruiter never mind.

Then she hung up and sat on the floor crying, her salty tears spilling out her lifelong dream.

The regrowth of a dream

The next day she prepared to find a new life with the fulfillment she'd imagined

would come from law enforcement.

But no matter what job Pearson took, she felt like a square peg trying to shove herself into a round hole. She was aimless and unfocused.

Then, late in 2006, Pearson saw a news report that HPD needed recruits and had raised the age limit for cadets to 44. She was 42.

"Why don't you try?" her roommate asked. "It can't hurt."

Can't hurt? Hadn't it already ripped out her heart?

She jotted down the phone number. The next morning, she called just to see where it would lead.

On Jan. 17, she passed the civil service exam. Then she passed the mental and physical tests. She started getting excited.

Officer Paul Singleton told her he had to do a background check and get her academy admittance approved. Routine stuff. She was almost there.

She'd heard that before.

Doubts crept in. What was she doing? Was she crazy? This was going to change her life. Was she too old?

She waited. For Singleton's call welcoming her to the force. But also for the other shoe to drop, to learn that her dream was again being choked to death.

Then, on May 30, the little window on her cell phone's face informed her she had a voice mail message.

"I've got good news," Singleton's familiar voice said. "Please give me a call back."

When she did, he told her Cadet Class 193 started June 25. Be there.

She nodded into the phone, relieved and weary.

The dream becomes reality

The first week of class is about changing how cadets live, said Lt. Greg Ware, in charge of cadet training.

It's ordered and uniform. It's pressed white shirts and polished black shoes that bounce the light back. It's cadets learning

to control themselves before they learn to control others.

Ware anticipates six to 10 cadets in Pearson's class won't graduate. Some will decide this semi-military life isn't for them. Others will have that decision made for them. Many of those will fail during the first 11 weeks, which are spent in the classroom.

During first-week assessments, Pearson passed push-ups, the 300-meter sprint and the 1.5-mile run. She was assigned to remedial classes in trigger pull, high jump and the agility run. That will make her days longer and her lunches shorter.

She takes it with good humor and high spirits.

"Yeah, it's a challenge, and it's tough, but it's fun," she said. "I've been looking for a challenge for years.

"This is what I've wanted my whole life. I'll do whatever it takes."

"You are competing for a job," Ware told the cadets their first morning as city of Houston employees. They won't be HPD employees until they are sworn in the day of graduation in January. "What you are trying to do is earn the right to wear this blue uniform. You will have to earn it. We don't give this blue uniform away.

"If you graduate from here, you should be real proud of what you accomplished."

For Pearson, getting here was an accomplishment. Now comes the real challenge.

Want to keep up with cadet Pearson?

Check out her weekly blog updating her trials, tribulations, and victories at www.citysavvy.org.

Watch HTV's "Academy 193," which will follow Pearson and six other cadets through four weeks of the academy. Check HTV listings for air times.