

Female Troopers Walking



The Thin Blue Line

The Three Amigas

There have been notable accomplishments for female troopers since Fran Howard became the first unrestricted service female trooper in 1970. In 1998, [Dyanne Brown](#) was the first woman to retire from a career as a trooper. In 2003, Julia Grimes became the first female trooper to wear the eagle insignia as the director of the Division of Alaska State Troopers.

Despite these milestones, the number of Stetson-wearing women in Alaska has stayed consistently low. Today, there are 15 females of the roughly 400 people that wear the uniform either as a state or wildlife trooper. That number hasn't changed much over the years, but no one seems to know the reason why.

Trooper investigator Angela Womack said the answers she gets from talking to women at recruitment fairs is they're reluctant to move their families around the state. However, to Womack and two other women who began their trooper careers at the same time 15 years ago, the diverse assignments is one of the things they like about being an Alaska State Trooper.

"I like my variety," Womack said. "I like being able to pick up and fly to the villages, deal with people, and meet new people."

Womack was one of six women who graduated in the same Public Safety

Click here for a link to the [Alaska Justice Center's statistical analysis](#) about state and local law enforcement in Alaska that outlines the number of sworn female officers.

Academy class in 1999. Because this was before a new wing with more rooms was built at the academy, all six were stuffed into the same room and shared a meager bathroom. Womack, Aileen Witrosky and Michelyn "Mikie" Pylilo were Alaska State Trooper recruits, while two others went on to be municipal police officers elsewhere in Alaska, including Ronda Wallace, who was named Kodiak police chief last year. Another female classmate became a deputy fire marshal.

Studies have shown that having women in law enforcement ranks can have its advantages. Women have to pass the same set of standards as men do in order to become a trooper and they have to do the same job that male troopers have to do. However, since women typically are smaller than men, they learn to deal with

Fran Howard Elmore stopped by the Women In Law Enforcement Recruitment Fair at the University of Alaska Anchorage in October to chat with Trooper Aileen Witrosky, pictured here with Elmore, other female troopers and Court Services Officers that were recruiting for the Alaska Department of Public Safety. Elmore was the first unrestricted service female trooper.





Trooper Aileen Witrosky, Court Services Officer Cheryl Gilmour, Recruitment Unit Sgt. Luis Nieves, CSO Alissa Noe and Trooper Michelyn Pylilo at the Women in Law Enforcement Recruitment Fair at the University of Alaska Anchorage on Oct. 22. Trooper Angela Womack is not pictured due to her duties as a drug investigator.

difficult subjects differently. Most rely more on de-escalating the situation by communication rather than brute force. While they are prepared to get physical because there are situations where it's unavoidable, they tend to take a different tact when approaching a situation. The job is service oriented, which requires good communication skills, something that can come a little easier for women. They also have a knack for being compassionate and empathetic.

"I'm just not by nature an in your face, slam you down kind of person," said Witrosky, who has spent the past 12 years working out of the Nome post. "Part of it is I'm smaller than most people and the other half is I'm just a jabber mouth."

Even despite being admittedly more aggressive than most women, Pylilo

said, she's not going to immediately jump in and fight.

"I'm very opinionated about the fact that I definitely think women can do this job. But don't put me in a box. The idea is 'you're good with kids, you're good with sexual assault victims.' I can do a heck of a lot more," she said. "Can I take down a big guy? Yes. But I can also look at a crime scene and evaluate a crime scene. I can interview suspects."

Likewise, there are some male troopers that may not be as physically strong and may have to deal with people differently. Men can also be compassionate and empathetic as well.

"Just like you can't lump all the men into the same clump, you don't lump all the females into the same bucket. We all come with different personalities," Pylilo said.

Womack admits that at the academy going through her initial law enforcement training, she was questioned whether she was aggressive enough for the job.

"It's kind of hard for me to be aggressive when we're play acting," she said. "But you don't always have to be aggressive in this job. There are times when it's warranted, but there are other ways to do things."

She never doubted that she could turn it on when needed.

Womack has spent most of her career as an investigator. Right after she finished her field training, she was moved to the General Investigation Unit, now known as the Alaska Bureau of Investigation, where she worked on major crimes such as homicides and child abuse.

She remembers while investigating a death after a baby got trapped between a wall and it's crib. She cried at the devastating loss the mother and father went through so soon after experiencing joy of being new parents. A seasoned male investigator who was working with her reassured that it was okay to cry because "we can't always be stoic."

To her, showing emotions doesn't necessarily make you look weak.

"I don't know if people look upon you with less respect," she said. "I think they can appreciate that you're human."



Trooper Aileen Witrosky talks to a Nome resident just outside the city limits.

The three were reunited while working the sixth annual Women in Law Enforcement Recruitment Fair at the University of Alaska-Anchorage in October. Each of them now have three stars apiece on their sleeves – one star counts for five years of service. Womack traveled from Bethel where she works as an investigator with the Western Alaska Alcohol and Narcotics Team. Witrosky is a patrol trooper out of Nome and Pylilo is a patrol sergeant in the Mat-Su Valley where she transferred after supervising the Mat-Su Major Crime Unit under the Alaska Bureau of Investigation. While together at the fair, they swapped stories, reminiscing about their antics while going through the academy and how their lives have changed since then.

Like the women who came before them, they continue to combat the normal adversaries and stereotypes that come with working in a male-dominated field. All three went through a pregnancy during their careers and all three had different experiences of how the department handled it.

“People didn’t know what to do with me,” Pylilo said. Because pregnancy means going on limited duty for months at a time, Pylilo said she had a

hard time getting supervisors to view her pregnancy differently than an injury. At the time, she was working patrol out of the Talkeetna post. It took a while to work out the details before she was sent to the Palmer post to do her limited duty. Witrosky had a different experience. Her supervisors let her decide when was the right time to stop working patrol. She then started working a domestic violence coordinator position, which entailed much different sort of footwork and a lot of paperwork. Still, she admits she wasn’t going to go chasing after a perpetrator, which allowed her to focus more on the administrative part of the job. Then, she was awarded her bid to transfer to Nome while she was pregnant and moved a month after giving birth to her youngest daughter.

None of them had a life-long aspiration of getting into law enforcement. Womack’s decision shocked her parents because she was a “daddy’s girl” and her mother is a very traditional Korean woman. However, she said



Sgt. Michelyn Pylilo is the only female patrol sergeant working for Alaska State Troopers. Otherwise, there is a female trooper supervising the Wildlife Investigations Unit and a female lieutenant in Alaska Bureau of Investigation.



Sue Acquistapace, pictured here in 1992 with her canine partner Heros, was a field training officer for trooper recruits Aileen Witrosky, Angela Womack and Michelyn Pylilo.

friends that knew her at the time weren't surprised by her career path.

Witrosky said she applied because "I needed a job."

"I watched COPS. They drive fast and arrest bad guys," she said. "I thought, 'I can do that.'"

Despite being the daughter of a well-known and respected trooper,

Pylilo chose first to become a TV reporter. She was a young adult before her father became a trooper. It wasn't until later she decided she wanted to be more involved in helping people instead of reporting on them that she decided to be a trooper.

Looking back 15 years at that optimistic young recruit, she sighed and laughed. "If I only knew ..."

"Most of the time you're just reacting. You can't arrest somebody because they might violate a domestic violence restraining order. They actually have to do something first," she said. "It's totally been a challenge. It hasn't been easy. There have been times that it has been absolutely rewarding and there have been times you say, 'I don't need this crap.'"

Sue Acquistapace helped train the three while they were new recruits in Fairbanks. Acquistapace wasn't keen on being pulled off of her investigative cases and put back onto patrol. It's not a standard practice to have female troopers assigned as Field Training Officers to female recruits. However, Pylilo said it was a good idea and she was fortunate to have Acquistapace as a mentor.

"It was fun. I connected with all three of them. It was good to be able to

hand off the baton," Acquistapace said. "They were really eager to learn. They really wanted to do the job. They tried very hard."

Acquistapace retired in 2004 after a 26-year-career working with law enforcement, first as a dispatcher, then as an officer with the Fairbanks International Airport Police and Fire Department before becoming an Alaska State Trooper. She is now a background investigator in Fairbanks for the AST recruitment unit. Part of her job now is helping bring recruits, including women, into law enforcement.

"Women belong in this field. We're talented. We bring a lot to it," Acquistapace said. "It's not about battle; it's not about fighting in the streets, which does happen. It requires caring; it requires compassion."

She remembers the derogatory comments that came from dealing with some people – mostly from drunk men when she told them she was going to handcuff them. Whenever a man gleefully submitted to the handcuffing, she just blew off the nasty comments and felt thankful for being able to take him into custody without any trouble. She also remembered answering a call for help from a woman whose disappointment was obvious when the scantily-clad woman answered the door to find a female trooper instead of a man. There were times men asked her out to dinner while sitting handcuffed in the backseat of her patrol car.

All four of them mentioned having more difficulty in arresting women than men, partially because some men look at them with respect they'd show a sister or mother. Some female offenders looked at them as someone they were on the same level, and therefore, beatable. Male troopers also mention that in certain circumstances, intoxicated females are more likely to fight harder and dirty while resisting arrest.

Acquistapace bristles at the emphasis that is placed upon women in law enforcement. While she admits there is a difference, she just doesn't like it being highlighted so much. To Acquistapace and other female officers and troopers, each individual, regardless of race or gender, handles things differently even despite receiving the same training.

"We're all troopers, whether we're male or female, black, white, green or purple," Acquistapace said. "We're all blue."



The End