



## Alaska State Troopers Citizen Academy Graduates First Class

On TV, crime fighters work in strangely-lit offices and solve transgressions in 48 minutes – all without messing up their hair or breaking a perfectly-manicured nail.

In real life, fighting crime is messier and more complicated.

Twenty-nine Alaskans now have a better grasp of just how challenging the job of providing public safety in Alaska is after recently completing the first ever Alaska State Troopers Citizen Academy in the Mat-Su Valley. Like the model for police citizen academies in the Lower 48, the program is designed to enhance citizens' understanding of the role of law enforcement in the community. However, unlike Lower 48 police departments, the role troopers play doesn't specifically focus on a small area like a county or predominately concentrate on highway patrol like other state agencies. Instead, troopers cover an area many times larger than most states and have a range of responsibilities as diverse as Alaska itself. That, as many found out, is what makes Alaska State Troopers stand apart.

"One of the amazing things to me is that all of the aspects that overlap each of the troopers' responsibilities in the state," said Dan Jeffrey, a pastor in Butte who like more than two dozen others, spent his Tuesday nights and a few Saturdays learning the different aspects of public safety and the criminal justice system in Alaska. "You have a trooper that is involved in three or four aspects of his own job" whether it's doing traffic stops, managing a search and rescue or getting additional training to be a member of the Special Emergency Reaction Team, which is the trooper's version of a SWAT team.

"That was sort of a wowie for me," he said. "I have a greater respect and appreciation for what they do ... If you realize that the troopers are few in number and have to handle a multitude of problems in the Valley, it's impossible for them to be everywhere at once."

Fellow academy graduate Marni Weiland was also amazed at the amount of multi-tasking troopers do on the job and the things taken into consideration before a trooper can take action.

"There are a lot of procedures that they have to go through to get things done," Weiland said. "They don't really just get to make whatever decision whenever they want. There's a lot more to it than that."

Because there are so many pieces to the public safety puzzle and enforcing law in Alaska, the citizen academy had expert presenters from a plethora of different fields from the Department of Law, Medical Examiner's Office, dispatch center in the Mat-Su Valley, wildlife troopers, AST Chaplains, crime prevention, fire investigations, drug and alcohol investigations and the state crime lab in the 12-week course running from Jan. 24 to graduation on April 10.

"They were all very knowledgeable," said Don Pickett, a retiree who lives in Big Lake. "Everybody they had wasn't some flunky from the office."

The academy also had sessions on how to improve personal protection from what kind of locks to use to make homes safer to defensive tactics during a Saturday lesson. The program ended with a day at the range before graduation learning about firearm safety on April 10.

The people that attended the academy were a mix of people from different walks of life to include retirees,



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- Yukon Don Tanner

Graduate of the first Alaska State Troopers Citizen Academy

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young adults with an interest in making a career of law enforcement, other emergency responders and business people in the Mat-Su Valley.

Talkeetna resident and Matanuska Electric Association worker Yukon Don Tanner signed up to learn about how troopers intersect the lives of MEA co-op members. As a long-time Alaska resident with five grown children living in the Valley, Tanner's previous interaction with troopers has been a combination of positive experiences and some not-so positive encounters. It was beneficial to hear some of the behind the scenes commentary and even light-hearted stories from troopers. To him, this openness is what connected with the attendees and made the program especially effective.

"I think it was much needed to open that veil and offer a glimpse behind it. (Troopers are) not a quiet, restrictive group," Tanner said. "They're involved in many, many pieces of our lives from body recoveries to handing out life jackets at the lake."

"And they do it well," he added. "I have a wholehearted appreciation for the level of commitment that is required to be a trooper and the level of commitment that is made by a trooper to pursue that career."

The citizen academy concept started in the United Kingdom in 1977. It made its way across the ocean in 1985 when the Florida Police Department implemented it to help reduce crime through a stronger citizen commitment to the police department and the community. Anchorage Police Department and the FBI in Anchorage have had their own citizen academies for a number of years. Alaska State Trooper Col. Keith Mallard had tried for several years to get an AST version started, but wasn't successful until after he took over as AST director in December of 2010. His first action as newly appointed colonel was put the wheels in motion for AST's citizen academy.

While the academy doesn't prepare graduates to become troopers or police officers, it instills people with a greater knowledge and understanding of Alaska State Troopers. One of the benefits of the program is

that it has turned attendees into advocates that can join conversations and correct some misconceptions about the job of enforcing laws in Alaska.

"They did their part, now it's up to us," Pickett said. "When somebody bad mouths them at a restaurant or café, we can at least set them straight as far as what the troopers actually do."

Pickett and Weiland have taken their involvement one step further and have ridden with working troopers and police officers. Pickett rode with Palmer Police Officer Pete Steen, who is a member of AST's Alaska Bureau of Highway Patrol that focuses on highway safety and enforcement. What struck Pickett was the amount of tolerance Steen exhibited while dealing with the occasional uncooperative person.

"He has more patience than anybody I know," Pickett said. "When some guy was trying to blow into the breathalyzer; he's faking and faking it. After three times, it gets aggravating."

Weiland was surprised at how many times motorists didn't pull over to make way for a trooper vehicle rushing to a call with flashing lights and a siren.

In the meantime, fellow academy graduates Linda and Gary Hessmer have been busy forming an AST Citizen Academy alumni association to continue promoting Alaska State Troopers in the Valley. They're designing a patch and researching community events to help foster public safety.

They all have been busy spreading the word about the program. Trooper Lt. Dave Tugmon, citizen academy coordinator, has already had applications for those wanting to attend the next academy in the Valley. It's tentatively scheduled to run from August to November.

Many who attended the academy had a similar suggestion for the next session – make it longer.

"It's like trying to take a drink out of a fire hydrant," Jeffrey said.

Tugmon has planned on extending the course by two weeks and scheduling a few more Saturdays to allow presenters more time on a single subject.

-Story by Beth Ipsen, AST Information Officer