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The University of Pittsburgh's Police Department Celebrates Fifty Years

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The University of Pittsburgh’s Police Department Celebrates Fifty Years

By Richard Parfitt, Lieutenant, University of Pittsburgh Police Department

As campus police departments go, being in existence for fifty years is quite a milestone and the University of Pittsburgh Police, better known as the Pitt Police, celebrated its golden anniversary this summer.

The University of Pittsburgh, established in 1787, ranks among the oldest universities in the United States. With beginnings in a log cabin in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it has grown to where today it includes nearly 100 buildings, including the tallest educational building in the United States, in Pittsburgh’s Oakland, South Side and Shadyside neighborhoods.

Although the university was nearly 169 years old before a formal police department was created, prior to 1956 it was a mostly commuter campus. As the university grew, problems became too great for the two Pittsburgh city police officers hired to control traffic and the night watchmen/custodians to handle. As Jonas Salk pioneered his polio vaccine at the university, its leaders, seeing an increase in vandalism, theft and parking problems, decided to protect the campus community by establishing a police department. What started with one officer in 1956 has become the third largest police department in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, with 74 sworn officers, 46 security guards, and 17 communications and support personnel. From patrolling with three motor scooters and an old Willy’s Jeep in 1956 and 1957 to a present fleet of 20 police vehicles, four motorcycles and six bicycles in 2006, the Pitt Police have expanded their response and prevention capabilities to serve the university community, which includes approximately 7,000 resident students.

Pitt Police have the responsibility of protecting over 40,000 students, staff and faculty in the campus community and have over the past fifty years served as protective host for dignitaries and VIPs, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and numerous heads of state, including former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela; Prince Andrew, Duke of York; and President George Bush. The police department has stood by as an active participant as well as a witness in various aspects of local, state and global history. During these fifty years, Pitt officers have protected the community, while the university grew into a world-renowned research institution, from the Salk polio vaccine to a leader in transplant surgery by Dr. Thomas Starzl. At one of the largest funeral services Pittsburgh has witnessed, the police department said farewell to Pennsylvania Senator, industry leader and philanthropist H. John Heinz, who died in a plane crash in 1991, at services held at the university’s Heinz Memorial Chapel. Honoring the victims of the worst attack on America, Pitt’s motorcycle officers participated in America’s 9/11 Ride for the past several years, helping escort thousands of motorcyclists along a route from

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the Flight 93 memorial site in Shanksville, Pennsylvania to the Pentagon and ending at the World Trade Center ground zero site.

As the University of Pittsburgh continued to grow in size and prestige, the department kept pace, establishing motorcycle and bicycle units to navigate the traffic in an area that includes five hospitals, Andrew Carnegie's donated library and museums as well as nearby Carnegie-Mellon and Carlow universities. Having responsibility over such a large area in an urban setting, the Pennsylvania legislature adopted and the governor signed legislation in 1993 to require Pitt officers to be trained and certified as with all municipal police officers in the state.

Officers and guards of the university police department have constantly strived to become recognized as professionals and our earliest leader, Charles Ray, was the fourth president of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators. Officers today must have a bachelor's degree as well as certification through the Pennsylvania Municipal Police Officers' Education and Training Commission to become police officers with the Pitt Police. The ranks have seen a number of officers spend many years and retire from the department, but some of the officers have moved on to work for the Pittsburgh and neighboring police departments as well as the state police, FBI and Secret Service.

Pitt officers have worked closely with the Pittsburgh city police for years, but were only authorized limited authority and jurisdiction by law. To meet the transience and complexities of crime, the jurisdiction of the campus police was statutorily enlarged in 1998 to include 500 yards around any building owned or leased by the university and authority of Pitt officers was expanded to grant them the same arrest powers as Pittsburgh police officers.

The university has been home to numerous educators, sports stars, war heroes, entertainers, Rhodes and Marshall Scholars, Nobel Laureates, writers and researchers and an unsung, dedicated group of men and women who work for the Pitt Police Department.

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