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On the Job with Orinda Deputy Sheriff Lisa Cook

By Laurie Snyder

“A lot of this job is how you talk to people. If you show somebody respect, they will show you respect back,” says Orinda police officer Lisa Cook – a no-nonsense professional who, despite having taken taller criminals to the ground when needed, has also developed a reputation for putting Girl Scouts and crime victims at ease. “There are times when a person wants to talk to a woman rather than a man. Sometimes, with little kids, it might help to be a female.”

She attributes much of her success to her dad. “He was into sports and he got me playing basketball. He made me who I am.” During 16 years of work in dentistry, Cook discovered a talent for investigative work. She decided to try her hand at the Police Academy and soon realized that she’s not just good at police work, she thrives on it. Employed by the Contra Costa Sheriff’s Department for more than seven years, she has been protecting Orindans for about one and a half years.

“We never, ever know what our day’s going to bring,” says the deputy sheriff of life on the job. The afternoon she was interviewed for this article, she was called to the scene of a car accident; days earlier, she and her partner helped an elderly resident joust with a home fire alarm that refused to be silenced.

But it is the time she spends with Orinda youngsters that clearly generates some of her most meaningful moments. “When you have kids all you can think of is that could be my kid,” she says, reflecting on past emergencies. If she could reach through the page of this newspaper, she’d give high school or college-age readers gentle forehead flicks to remind them that they’re not invincible. Her own daughter’s best friend was killed in a car accident. “You never think it can happen to you. It can and does happen. Don’t take life for granted.”

It’s a message that Cook and her husband, a fellow deputy, live and breathe. Although the job is “90 per-

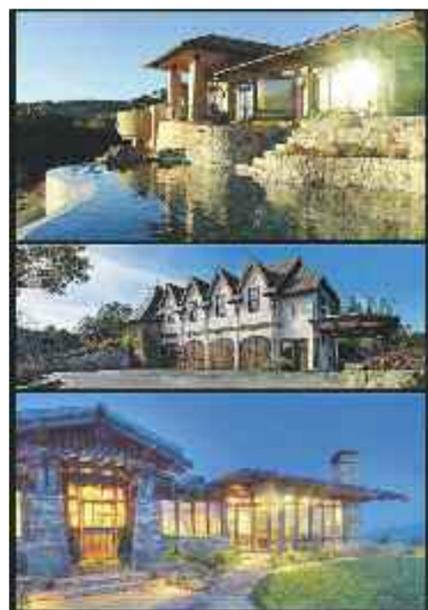
cent paperwork and following up and investigating,” they’re acutely aware that bad things can and do happen. So, they make sure to carve time out of hectic schedules for regular date nights, and always tell each other to be safe every day before leaving for their shifts. “We just never know.”

Most Orinda police officers you encounter will echo that sentiment. While finding weapons on a suspect can send hearts racing, it can be even more stressful responding to residents’ homes when neighbors call to report someone at risk of domestic violence or elder abuse. Several of the most challenging moments for Cook have come during encounters with individuals showing signs of mental illness. In cases that require “a 5150” – when police officers or mental health workers must involuntarily commit someone for psychiatric confinement because that individual poses a danger to himself or others – things can go south very quickly.

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