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New chief plans upgrades for the department

MILAN – Like the set of “True Detective” or “The Streets of San Francisco,” the Milan Police Department headquarters is reminiscent of a police headquarters from a 1970s-era TV police show.

Despite cramped headquarters, the roughly dozen cops make it work. While the new Chief of Police Pat Salazar takes note of functional aesthetics of the MPD, he’s focusing his energy on boosting morale and bringing the staffing count to 15 full-time officers.

In a way, Salazar has come full-circle. He got his start in law enforcement in Milan in 1995, working there for five years alongside a K9 working dog Themis.

Salazar also hails from Milan, but spent the bulk of his law enforcement career working in Gallup. He recently retired from the McKinley County Sheriff’s Office as lieutenant in charge of the narcotics division. Prior to joining the MCSO, he worked for the Gallup Police Department for about 20 years. He also had a brief stint working for the New Mexico Motor Transportation Police before moving on to the Pueblo of Acoma Police Department, working there for two years.

He got the job at the GPD, by happenstance. While working for Acoma he did a good deed, but nothing out of the ordinary in this realm of public service. While on patrol, Salazar pulled over to help a man who had a flat tire on his boat trailer.

“I always keep my tools with me for fixing tires in the back of my patrol car,” he said.

“After I changed the tire he comes up to me and he goes, ‘How would you like to come work for me?’ It turns out he was the Chief of Gallup PD, Chief Stanley.”

Salazar said that he immediately went to work in narcotics and investigations for GPD.

“Gallup was very, very, busy and understaffed,” he said. “We had a very good record of putting people in prison though.”

So does Milan have a drug problem? Like most communities, methamphetamine and opiate abuse is on the rise across the country, and Salazar hopes his experience and skill set will help net more drug offenders.

He reflected on the camaraderie that was forged between officers and deputies of the different law enforcement entities within McKinley County that often cross paths in the line of duty.

“Gallup Police Department, McKinley County Sheriff, and Navajo Police Department all work very closely together,” he said. “That’s why at that time, after I had left for MCSO, we started to help GPD reform their narcotics department along with the DA (district attorney).”

Salazar explained that the MPD, GPD, FBI, and MCSO are working closely together in the area to up the ante on drug arrests within the next year.

In his new position, it's not all about investigative operations, however, as Salazar explained.

He's working on streamlining processes around the Milan headquarters, and bringing the department into the 21st century by digitizing all of the paperwork a police department can generate. He explained that this will save precious time, otherwise, wasted hunting down paperwork – precious time that can be applied to patrols and investigations.

It will also offer a valuable database officers can search quickly for operations support.

MPD sits adjacent to a large plot of land owned by the Village of Milan, the location of choice for a much needed larger, updated building.

"Maybe this will be turned into a museum someday," he foreshadowed, gesturing around at the outdated, but otherwise charming and clean little police station. Salazar then explained he is already planning on erecting a new police department for the officers already in Milan and the four new officers he's headhunting.

SALAZAR MOVES ON WITHOUT COMPANION

One of the things Salazar will miss the most about his time at MCSO is his K9 companion, a chocolate lab named Cedar, a trained narcotics agent. He has another 3 to 4 years of service left, and the MCSO said they can't afford to let go of him yet.

"I had him for four years, so my family is very upset," Salazar said. "At first they told me I could keep him but then I got a call from HR (human resources) saying I couldn't."

When asked what would become of the dog, after he was allowed to retire in an estimated four years, he smiled sadly and guessed, "He'll probably go home with the most recent deputy in charge of him."

Similar stories are found nationwide and it's always a difficult transition for both the dog and officer.

"I really wanted to give him the dog," MCSO Sheriff Ron Silversmith said. "I couldn't because it's the property of the county and ultimately the taxpayers … my hands are tied. I tried though, I had her assessed and checked for problems. The dog is in good health according to our veterinarian and was finally assessed in the thousands of dollars. We just can't afford to let him go right now."

APPLICANTS FOR THE JOB

Marcela Sandoval, the Village of Milan Manager, who announced the hiring, said that they only had four applicants vying for the job.

The other applicants were Tomas Archuleta, Adrian Molina, and James Johns.

Salazar was looking forward to retirement in July. This was before fellow officers, friends and citizens of Milan pleaded with him to take on the top position, so the area could benefit from his wisdom and experience.

When asked when he was finally going to retire, he replied, "Now? Never! I'm going to work until I can't," he laughed.

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