

# POPD's 'institutional resource' retires

## Deputy Chief Dale Schuster steps down after 35 years

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PORT ORCHARD — Outside City Hall, about a half-dozen people waved signs while staging a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest on Bay Street, as they do each Friday.

Inside, officers and staff members walked past the office of Deputy Police Chief Dale Schuster, each wearing facemasks as part of the building's COVID-19 protocol, and wished him the best as they left at the end of their shift.

It's been that kind of year: a viral pandemic for the ages and street protests mixing peaceful social activists and law-enforcement officers with violent opportunists looking to foment trouble. Throw in an ugly, divisive political campaign for president and you have a tension-filled, often hateful environment that has permeated every sector of the nation.

With that as a disruptive backdrop, Schuster — a 35-year veteran of the Port Orchard Police Department — closed out his long career with the force, which began in September 1985 when he joined as a rookie officer after spending a few years as a reserve policeman.

Standing outside Schuster's office was the department's newest — and youngest — member, officer Austin Culbert, who was heading out for his night-time patrol shift. Could it be possible that the rookie is old enough to be a cop?

"What I'll miss is not seeing you bloom into a great police officer," Schuster said to the young rookie.

After Culbert departed, the retiring second-in-command said, "I remember looking like that, with a head full of dark hair," he laughed, pointing to a black-and-white Port Orchard Independent photo of himself standing next to an '80s-era police cruiser.

"I remember pulling a car over after I first started and the guy inside looking at me, probably thinking, 'Are you old enough to be a police officer?'"

### The call of Father Time

But Father Time invariably takes its toll, and the body and mind remind one that it's time to call it a career. And that's the case with Schuster, 35 years later.

"It's almost bittersweet — a happy time but a sad time," he said as the clock signaled that his day, and his career, was nearing an end.

"You know the saying, 'You know when you know?' This year has been tough and brutal for everybody. Between the COVID and the riots and the negativity placed on the officers, you're always waiting for when the next shoe is going to drop."

Schuster said while the events of this momentous year weren't necessarily the tipping point for his decision to retire, it didn't mean they weren't factors in his decision.

"If I'd known what 2020 was going to be like, I probably would have left in 2019," he said with a quiet laugh.

Rather, his choice to retire was a strategic decision, the 60-year-old Schuster said. "It has always been a decision I knew I'd make based on a number of factors. You want to make that decision because you don't know how long you're going to live. You can't buy time. But you also want to make sure you retire with enough to live on comfortably."

"If I knew the day that I was going to drop dead, maybe I'd make a different decision. You hope you're not that guy who retires and then drops dead the next day."

Another of Schuster's fellow public servants, officer Bill Schaibley, came by to say farewell. Schaibley, who joined the Port Orchard police force in 1997, hesitated as he went to give his old partner a hug despite the COVID environment. His voice mirrored the emotion inside the police department as he shared a few brief farewells, then left the office.

Afterward, the deputy chief paused, then said softly, "They all are a great bunch of human beings. They care about their fellow officers and they care about the citizens."

In between visits by departing staff members, Schuster recalled how he first got to be a police officer. It wasn't something he yearned for as a young guy.



Courtesy photo 1985

Dale Schuster joined the Port Orchard Police Department as a rookie officer in 1985 (shown in photo).

"One of my best friends in high school always wanted to be a police officer," he said. "And he did — he retired in mid-2020 as a deputy sheriff. But I didn't."

After graduating from South Kitsap High in 1978, he worked at K2 [the snow ski company on Vashon Island] for 3 1/2 years before getting laid off in 1982.

But instead of rejoining the workforce, Schuster chose to get a degree at Olympic College. During that stretch, he saw a City of Port Orchard advertisement for reserve police officers. A volunteer firefighter at that time, he thought the prospect sounded interesting and applied.

"I went through the interviews and was shocked when they called me back," he said. "They told me, 'We want to take you, but you've got to cut your hair.' Like most guys at the time, I thought, 'Oh, my god ...' then I figured, well, I guess my hair will grow back. That was in 1983. After college and getting some experience as a reserve, I went to the police academy."

"I thought, 'This isn't really that bad and it's kind of exciting.' I started applying for full-time positions at local agencies. Then Port Orchard called me back."

### Small-town Port Orchard

The police department and the Port Orchard area were different places in 1985. The force had just 10 officers and the city was a rural burg back then with only 3,000 residents and just two stoplights — one downtown and the other next to where KFC now sits. Bethel Road was governed by stop signs and bordered by cow pastures. There were only two ways to get across town: either through downtown or heading down Sedgwick. A third way, the Tremont Street bridge, was on the cusp of completion.

"I remember driving around town at around 2 a.m. by myself, just out of the academy and knowing I was the only police officer on duty," Schuster recalled. "It was a little scary at the time to realize 'you're it.'"

Back then, intoxicated drivers were a routine hazard on Port Orchard roads at night.

"I remember arresting 25 DUIs in one month during the '80s. On one graveyard shift, I arrested three DUIs. I'd bring one in, book him, go back out and bring another one in. Every restaurant had a bar. I counted 33 bars in town then. We took DUIs seriously, and I certainly did."

These days, however, drivers seem much more aware of the ramifications of drunk driving, Schuster said. "They're more aware, not just in getting arrested but in what would happen if you killed somebody."

"DUIs are harder to find, but they're out there. They know you're looking for them."

Schuster said he's also seen changes in another societal problem: drugs. In the '90s, he said, cocaine was king. Then methamphetamines came on the scene. Heroin was a bit on the fringes then, but that drug has made a big comeback.

"Now there's the advent of synthetic heroin with fentanyl that's way more powerful than regular heroin. And it really makes it dangerous for the officers out on the street."



Courtesy photo

Deputy Police Chief Dale Schuster is wrapping up 35 years as a member of the Port Orchard Police Department.

Like most officers who have patrolled the streets during their career, he remembers the tragedy and the ugliness that society can unveil. Schuster said he remembers with clarity the fatality traffic accidents, the homicides and the suicides to which he's responded.

"Most of the things people don't want to do, cops have to do them," he said. "Things like telling a parent that their child just was killed, interviewing child molesters, finding a young girl who had died traumatically in a car accident. I've had a guy die in my arms in a traffic accident. You cannot see what you've seen."

And when you've seen man's inhumanity to man, it takes a toll on even the most stoic of officers.

"It's shocking what people can do to each other. It's tough when you see that day in and day out."

These days, simply being a police officer in itself is a controversial act for many. Schuster said it's essential that someone wanting to become a law enforcement official develop a thick skin.

"You have to take a deep breath and walk out and do your job. A lot of people have no idea what

we do. We're human, and we do a lot of good things. I've delivered babies. I've watched officers buy lunches for homeless people. I've seen them spend their own money to buy clothes and shoes, go out of their way to get people into drug treatment, and volunteer to help a hoarder clean out their house."

As of the end of last Friday, Schuster has hung up his police uniform for good, and that causes a lump to rise in his throat. "This has been my identity for so many years, more than half my life. I guess guys in the military experience the same thing when they retire, losing that identity," he said.

This page of his life story having been turned, the new retiree said he will stay busy working on two vintage Mustangs parked in his garage and a 1956 Willys Jeep his dad bought in 1964 that's still awaiting restoration on his 33-acre property. Schuster said he has a portable wood mill ready to cut some of the lumber standing on the wooded property.

And, of course, he'll be able to spend more time with his wife Carolyn at home in the Sunnyslope area and his five adult children.

### Size 12 shoes to fill

Replacing Schuster as deputy chief will be veteran sergeant Donna Main, who will supervise three new sergeants in her new role.

Police Chief Matt Brown said Main will do a fine job, but conceded she has big shoes to fill.

"Dale had the opportunity to retire at the same time as the previous police chief did last year, but he made the choice to stay, not only help me but to help the department deal with me," Brown said with a smile. "Sometimes you have to have someone translate. He knows these people far better than I do, having been here so long."

Schuster's a thankful guy, to be sure. Thankful for living in the Port Orchard community he's loved and served all these years. And fortunate in his mind to never have left a bullet in another human being.

"That possibility is part of the job and you train for it, but you hope you never have to do it," he said.

"I've always counted my blessings that I've never had to take a life in the line of duty," he said. "It was one of the things that I prayed I'd never have to do ... and I never did."