

“Brown-Eyed Girl” Learns The Beat

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Paul Bass Photo

The sun was setting the other night as “Messy” rode by Congress Market on his bike. Officer Maneet Bhagtana yelled hello.

Messy, who’s 17 and in trouble with the law a lot, can’t say Bhagtana’s name.

Messy does know her. He waved hello, then turned the corner.

Most people Bhagtana (pictured) runs into on the beat in the Hill neighborhood either don’t know or can’t remember her name.

The kids on the street call her “Brown-Eyed Girl.” Or they call her and her partner, Officer Mary Helland, “the two girl cops.” As in: “There go the two girl cops.”

Bhagtana doesn’t mind. As long as they respect her — and talk with her. Whether or not (or especially if) they’re in trouble. In turn, she makes sure to learn their names, their nicknames, where they hang out, even how they walk.

“As long as they recognize we’re here, that’s all that matters,” Bhagtana said.

She has been learning about that, about how to become a trusted and respected neighborhood presence, on the 7 p.m. to 3 a.m. shift in the Hill North district. That’s prime time for shootings and domestic disturbances.

Bhagtana, a 23-year-old Mumbai native who moved with her family to Queens when she was 10, worked her way through University of New Haven in order to study criminal justice. (She watched a lot of Law and Order growing up.) She graduated from the police academy last December.

Since the spring she has been assigned to the Hill, learning the ropes of community policing under the general tutelage of district manager Lt. Holly Wasilewski.

“Seeing [a woman] in a position like that, it challenges me,” Bhagtana said. “It motivates me to be in a position like hers one day.”

Bhagtana is learning those community policing lessons more immediately while walking the beat with partner Helland, a five-year veteran of the force. They’re the New Haven force’s only two-female patrol team. “We’re like sisters,” they said.

One of the first lessons came this May, during one of Bhagtana’s first rounds with Helland. The lesson involved Messy.

“Pray For Me”



All that Bhagtana knew at first was that a teenaged boy had been shot on Howard Avenue. She and Helland (at right in photo) went to Yale-New Haven to see him.

Bhagtana watched as Messy, in obvious pain, greeted Helland.

“Come here Helland,” Messy said.

“Can you pray for me, Helland?” he said. “It hurts so bad. I just want you to know.”

Someone had shot Messy in the shoulder. Although he’d turn out fine, at the moment the pain was excruciating.

It turned out that Helland knew Messy so well because she’d been arresting him since he was 14.

“This kid just got shot, and he saying that to her. I’m watching him. He actually held her hand,” Bhagtana recalled in a conversation this week near the substation at Congress and Hallock.

That was no isolated encounter, Bhagtana learned. Helland seemed to know everyone. People seemed to trust her, even if she’d arrested them.

Officer Helland (at right in photo) said she “never thought I’d have a relationship with these kids” when she was first assigned to a walking beat on Stevens Street five years ago. Helland is 31. A third-generation Fair Havener (her grandfather attended Strong School), she originally thought she’d become a nurse. She became a cop instead.

You get to know people better based on how you approach them, Helland said. “It doesn’t have to be yelling and pulling out your nightstick.”

She discovered that many kids want adults, including cops, to pay attention to them, even if that attention involves confronting them for doing wrong.

She got to know the kids partly by taking them out of town. For four summers she along with other officers brought dozens of “at risk” Hill teens to Camp Rell for a week of camping out, mile runs, sit ups, competitions, leading up to an awards ceremony with the National Guard. (The program was canceled this year due to the state budget crunch.)

Bhagtana watched another one of Helland’s relationships help defuse a family dispute one night earlier this month. A woman called them to Hallock Street to report her 16 year-old daughter missing. She and the daughter had been arguing. The girl was pregnant. Mom wanted her to have an abortion. The girl didn’t want to.

Helland knows the girl’s father, BJ. He lives across town in Newhallville.

The people in that household, including BJ, get in trouble with the law. Bhagtana and Helland drove there. Bhagtana didn’t know if BJ and his household would cooperate, let alone open the door.

The cops were welcomed inside. The daughter was there.

“I saw how [Helland] was relating to them,” Bhagtana recalled. “They could have refused entry to the house.”

Inside, Helland discussed the situation with the family. The girl said she couldn’t productively speak one-on-one with her mother. Helland suggested that the two set up a meeting with a neutral third party. She referred them to a school-based counselor.

“I tell them, ‘Today’s today,’” Helland said of her approach to people like BJ or Messy when she arrests them. “‘Tomorrow’s another day, a clean slate.’”

Car Radar

Bhagtana also noticed how Helland gets to know not just the people, but the cars they drive — down to the license plates. When a plate number came over the radio, Helland sometimes recognize whose car it belongs to, and where to find it.

On the overnight shift, productive cases can begin with keeping tabs on cars. One night in June Helland and Bhagtana noticed the driver of a Honda with tinted windows cutting off another driver at Kossuth and Congress. The officers tried to stop the Honda. The driver refused to stop. A chase ensued.

Bhagtana was behind the wheel. She’d never chased a driver before.

“It was nerve-wracking,” she recalled. She was thinking, “Oh gosh, I hope I don’t crash!”

Fortunately, the driver was fleeing, but not speeding. The driver braked a lot, then starting back up.

Finally the Honda stopped at the intersection of Frank and Lines.

“We thought they were going to bail out of the car and start running different ways,” Bhagtana recalled. She and Helland hurried to the Honda. They pulled three men out; the men didn’t resist. Then Helland checked the car — and found a .32 caliber Beretta.

It turned out the gun had been used in five shootings in the Hill. And it turned out the gun wasn’t registered to any of the men in the car. It was registered to a Waterbury police sergeant. After a subsequent investigation police arrested the man for alleged illegal transfers of guns and stockpiling weapons and explosives in his Westville home. (The sergeant has pleaded not guilty to the charges.)

Continuing Ed



Although out of the academy for almost a year, Bhagtana is still in some respects in school as she picks up tips from her more experienced colleagues.

“She wants to learn. She’ll ask you a lot of questions,” Lt. Wasilewski said. “It’s refreshing. She really wants to work out here and do her job.”

Hill South cops organize community events like cook-outs and, at summer’s end, a giveaway of backpacks filled with school supplies. Wasilewski doesn’t have to encourage Bhagtana to take part on her after-work hours. Instead, she recently had to tell Bhagtana it was OK to miss one event. “I told her, ‘There’ll be other events.’” A Halloween party’s coming up.

Helland said Bhagtana picks up on lessons quick. One recent day a man walking down Congress Avenue spotted “the two girl cops.” He slipped his hood over his head so they couldn’t see his face.

“That’s Digler,” Baghtana told Helland. “I can tell by the way he walks.”

The man was wanted for violating probation. They proceeded to place him into custody.