

Ride Along: A Story of NADEC's Strengthening

It is not even six o'clock but the sun is already low as we pull into the parking lot of a cheerless Thornton City apartment complex, drab, gray buildings stacked like worn blocks around a shallow, man-made pond. I'm with Sergeant Jim Gerhardt of the Thornton Police Department, on my first-ever ride-along. We're responding to a complaint that someone has called in about a mentally unstable man causing a ruckus in the complex's laundry room. One of Thornton Police Department's "regulars," as it were, a frequent object of neighbors' complaints.

By the time we arrive, though, Charlie (we'll call him) is long gone. So Sergeant Gerhardt and I pile back in to the patrol car to circle the lot once more before heading back out. We've only just rounded the first corner when we see her, auburn hair hanging limply around her face, tired eyes lit with panic.

"Everything OK?" Sergeant Gerhardt asks as he rolls to a stop beside her.

"Actually, no," the woman says, tightening her already vice-like grip on the small hand of the child beside her (her son, it turns out). Her eyes dart around. "I don't know where my daughter's at. She was right there, right outside my window. I was on the phone for just – for maybe ten minutes. And she was playing across the parking lot in the playground, I could see her ..." She turns her head from side to side, still searching as she speaks. "She was right there, right across the lot where I could see her. I was only on the phone maybe ten minutes." I am at least five feet from her, inside a squad car with Sergeant Gerhardt between us, and I can *feel* her panic. Sergeant Gerhardt takes down a description of the girl and the woman's apartment number, tells her we'll take a look around, and calls it in.

We loop the entire complex in less than ten minutes, stopping to ask a few children if they've seen a girl that matches the description her mom gave us, and by the time we've come back around another squad car has arrived. Seconds later, mom is out on her porch, waving us off. "She's here," she says, visibly relieved. "She's fine. She was just at the neighbor's."

I look at Sergeant Gerhardt, expecting a nod and maybe a congratulatory handshake or something before we move on to the next call. Instead, he confers with the other officer through rolled-down windows before parking and exiting the squad car. He leans back in through his window. "We're just gonna do a little follow up," he says, grabbing his pen and notebook. "You should come."

I climb out of the passenger seat and tentatively follow the two cops up the stairs. I must look confused – after all, the girl is safely back home and all is right again – because Sergeant Gerhardt is now explaining, his voice low, that it's routine for them to ask some follow-up questions when a child as young as this girl has gone missing, even for as few as ten minutes.

Ok, I think. I guess that makes sense.

The other cop takes the lead, bounding up the stairs with undisguised bravado, chest puffed out, gum snapping. I stifle a giggle; I actually think he's showing off for me.

My amusement, though, shifts quickly to anger as he throws question after question at the woman with a persistence that borders, I find myself thinking, on harassment. She seems to shrink with each one, spluttering, defensive, and – dare I suggest it – completely and utterly confused. Wasn't she, just moments ago, the frantic mother searching for her lost child? What gives?

"Where were you when your daughter was playing? On the phone? Uh huh. Who were you talking to? Oh really? How long were you talking? So you weren't watching your daughter? Oh, you can see her through the window? But you weren't actually *watching* her. Were you watching her the whole time? No? I don't care if she was right across the street, ma'am. How long were on the phone not watching her? Uh huh. Do you mind if I go inside and have a look?"

At this, she turns and appeals to Sergeant Gerhardt, who Good-Cops her with the same explanation he's just given me. *It's routine, ma'am ... when the child is this young, ma'am ... just a follow up, ma'am. You're cooperation would be greatly appreciated. Make it all go a whole lot smoother.*

The first cop asks again, with more insistence, "So do I have your permission to come in and look around?" She is suddenly indignant, and clings to this like it's a life line. Watching the exchange, more than a little indignant myself, I feel like I'm holding the other end. Then, "Have you been drinking, ma'am?" he asks. She freezes.

Um, what?? I think. Where did that come from??

This last question dangles in the air between them. She stammers a feeble response. "Well ... just, like, y'know ... maybe just, um No, not – well, just like maybe *half* a beer only ... "

And just like that, the jig is up. Protesting, even more feebly, she grants the cops permission to enter the apartment. Within minutes, they have discovered the dregs of a dime bag of marijuana and what appears to be a crack pipe; soon after, a gigantic bong. Oh, and the "half a beer" she'd been drinking? A forty-ouncer.

DEC protocol dictates that a call must be placed to Social Services and they come back with a record on her a mile long for neglect and child endangerment. They call her sister, who sighs with been-here-before resignation when she hears the story, to take the kids. And mom is cuffed and carted off in a waiting squad car.

I am, in a word, flabbergasted. And, frankly, humbled. I was so certain they were grandstanding, showing the newbie non-cop "how it's done." I was leaping to this woman's defense (ok, in the privacy of my own mind), outraged at the intrusion into her life and the skepticism with which they regarded her. I mean, what parent *hasn't* turned her back on her kid for a minute – to take a phone call, to put the groceries away, to go to the bathroom! – and felt the terror that grips her belly when she turns back around and, suddenly, the kid is not where she left her? What a waste of time, I thought, to harass this woman with such ridiculous and groundless questions when they could have been out catching the "real" bad guys. Hadn't she shown she cared? Hadn't she been out looking?

"You're not alone," Sergeant Gerhardt tells me when I confess all this to him later. "In fact," he says, "most of the cops in this country would have done the same thing you would have. They'd have seen the frantic, concerned mother – who just turned her back for a minute, while she was on the phone – reunited with her briefly missing child, and left with a handshake and a smile. And that's what we're trying to change. We're trying to train cops to look at these situations differently, to stop a crime *before* it happens."

The idea, Jim explains, is to capitalize on opportunities for intervention. Here at NADEC, it is our hope – more than that, it is our mission – to help him, and the thousands of cops, social workers, medical professionals, and court professionals around the country just like him, to do just that.

