

Fit For Your Trust

It happens at least once a day that a cop car is found in front of a Dunkin Donuts. Unfit for the job, they sit and eat donuts all day. Certainly they don't pay attention to what's going on and are only looking to get people in trouble because they are on a "power trip." Everyone in the department is "probably" overweight and couldn't do a sit-up if their job depended on it. Unfortunately, as of January 2007, their job does depend on it. Anyone who works for Law Enforcement in the state of Florida is required to perform physical activities to prove they can serve the community.

The individuals who work for Law Enforcement are given benefits because it's considered a high risk job. I, Blake Townsend Sheldon, did an interview with Jennifer Ruth DeAntoni-Damiani to investigate her thoughts on the stereotypes the public has about law enforcement. She is a Probation Officer in the Upper Keys in Florida. She led me to believe that their job demands physical and mental strength to do. I felt naïve for having preconceptions about the police; I was curious whether or not she was aware of these preconceptions. "I know you're doing this interview on my behalf, but I am curious, do you, or did you have any stereotypes that you apply to law enforcement?"

She chuckled, "Well, we're all supposed to be eating donuts, right? I can't say I've ever had a donut on the job." What she said next caught my attention, "... as of this year (2007) all high risk employees of the department are required to pass a physical fitness assessment." On her computer, she pulled up Section 33-208.002(3)(a), which is a state document detailing the new requirements that officers must execute. She continued, "On June 1st, 2007, the first of these assessments are to take place."

I reviewed the document thoroughly. On the first page the document's purpose read, "To ensure the safe and effective performance of essential and critical job

functions of all certified officers; to set physical standards and the guidelines to enforce those standards; *to improve public trust and confidence in the department's certified officers*; and to improve esprit de corps." I was awestruck, the authorities were on to the general public! They've recognized society's outlook on their poor physique, and were now going to "improve public trust" by standardizing a physical assessment.

My preconceptions still battled the idea that officers were going to become physically fit. I couldn't take it seriously, until I saw the events (tasks) they had to perform. There are three tasks: curl ups (sit-ups), push-ups, and a one and a half mile Run/Walk. Sorted by age and sex, there are listed minimum and superior requirements for each task. The details explain that all officers are required to meet superior standards in each task. If, in the middle of a routine, proper form is not used, they must restart the event from the beginning. These tests had to be performed twice a year every six months.

For Officer DeAntoni-Damiani, this meant she had to run one and a half miles in seventeen minutes, perform ten consecutive push-ups in two minutes, and twenty-seven consecutive sit-ups in two minutes. For a male officer in their twenties, they would have to perform the run in less than twelve minutes, thirty-nine consecutive push-ups in two minutes, and fifty sit-ups in less than two minutes. As a reverse preconception, I don't think the average American could meet the requirements listed.

I concluded that there had to be a catch. With all of the overweight police, I couldn't see this as a reality. I asked Jennifer to elaborate on what would happen if an officer didn't meet the requirements. She began with, "They'll lose their job."

Again, I was in shock. I *almost* felt pity for all the officers who wouldn't make the cut. "So, if they fail, they are thrown to the street? They can't just cut them. Isn't there a second chance?"

A horrified expression came across her face as she placed some files into the bin next to her. "There is a second chance. If they don't perform the first time, then they'll be put on probation until the next physical assessment. If they fail the second assessment, then they are transferred to a different job if it's available that isn't considered high risk, or they can find a different job."

The thought that a probation officer could be put on probation was humorous to me, and I mentioned it to her. She didn't find it funny. She started to describe what she's been doing to physically get in shape for her assessment on the first of June. "At the beginning of the year [January 2007], I weighed 198 pounds. Today [May 28th, 2007], I weigh 135 pounds. Since the release of this new assessment, I've reformatted the downstairs of my home into a gym. I wake up at five in the morning and run on the treadmill for an hour, and then do push-ups and sit-ups before leaving for work at six thirty."

I was compelled to congratulate her. Losing sixty-three pounds is remarkable. I felt as if I insulted her by doing the interview; clearly the severity of this assessment isn't taken lightly by her. She continued, "I have 140 offenders on my case load. If I was removed from this job, they'd be lost." I'd later find out that the average case load for a probation officer is twenty to forty offenders. "If you're interested, you can come to my assessment. I'm not sure if you'd be able to watch other officers do their test, but you could at least watch mine." She smiled, "I think I'm ready for it."

I accepted her offer. I was intrigued to figure out how faulty my preconceptions were. Thus far, I had been dumbfounded at every conjunction.

I was convinced that this assessment was going to be serious, and it was. I had entered the "enemies" territory; I felt like I was in Copville, or some highly concentrated place where officers convene. Ironically, it wasn't me getting the speeding ticket, or me

being convicted. They were there to prove their usefulness to me, and the rest of society. Of all shapes and sizes, they were awaiting their atonement.

"*Ready, set, go...*" the administrator would say, and one by one, an officer would be assessed. I wasn't able to be close to the drilling, but I watched Officer DeAntoni-Damiani from a distance. I counted in my head along with the administrator as he shouted her push-up count, "One... two... three... four. Five... FIVE, FORM! Five, FORM! ..." Her form had slipped and they weren't counted. She fell to her knees and decided to restart. After wasting some of her strength, she flawlessly performed the next ten push-ups to qualify.

The second task was curl-ups, or sit-ups. As I watched some officers fail, I began to feel pity for them. Since this was the first physical assessment ever conducted, I assumed a lot of them didn't know how serious it was. I'd sigh when I'd hear an instructor repeat a number, "Ten, form. TEN, FORM! Ten, FORM!"

As Officer DeAntoni-Damiani's sit-up assessment came, I grew nervous. I had seen far more officers fail this task than the previous one. Almost effortlessly, she climbed to twenty sit-ups, but began to fade. What seemed like two seconds to me, she had stopped and laid down on the floor. The administrator told her she needed to restart for not doing them consecutively. Like a fan at baseball game that curses at the umpire for making a bad call, I was cursing at the administrator, but in my head. After doing twenty-two sit-ups, he was going make her do twenty-seven more. She took a few seconds to breath, and then the administrator said, "*Ready, set, go.*" She struggled through it, but she managed pass. She handed her score sheet to the instructor and he wrote down her score and initialed it.

There was a group of conductors administrating the mile and a half run. With their clipboards and stopwatches, they had the officers run by age group around a track. I had picked Officer DeAntoni-Damiani out of her heat. According to my watch she was

in the superior listing, and second to finish. Obviously, this task was no sweat off her back. She had successfully passed all three events and would be tested again in January of 2008.

Out of the 140 offenders on her case load, I wonder how many realize the dedication she has to being their probation officer. As a college student, I'm lucky to be awake before ten in the morning. By that time, Jennifer Ruth DeAntoni-Damiani has woken up, ran on the treadmill, done a workout, and put in three hours of work. For me to call her lazy, unfit, or on a power trip would be a blatant lie. The purpose of Section 33-208.002(3)(a) is to "improve public trust and confidence in the department's certified officers..." To say the least, I would trust Officer DeAntoni-Damiani, and my confidence in her ability to do her job exceeds any standards I would've set for her. If I was ever in a situation that required an official's assistance, and she showed up to help me, I would know that I am in good hands.