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Sharen Sumpter Deitz
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Sharen Sumpter Deitz

“I’m not a woman, I’m a trooper”

By Aaron Parsons

Often, we hear stories of bravery and heroism regarding our state troopers. They risk their lives every day to ensure that West Virginia citizens feel safe and protected, and their respect is well earned. However, one of the West Virginia State Police’s (WVSP) greatest stories of courage has been overlooked by many: that of Sharen Sumpter Deitz, our state’s first female trooper. I recently interviewed Sharen about her life, influences, accomplishments, and struggles.

Born to Irene and Brenice Sumpter, Sharen was brought up as a farm girl in Heaters, Braxton County. Her family raised Shetland ponies and, at one point, had about 60. Sharen helped with the farm work and learned how to drive a tractor by age 10. She’d drive it and a pickup truck back and forth between the Sumpters’ two farms, transporting hay and other goods. At one point, Sharen’s father was even asked by state troopers to make sure she didn’t drive on the main road. Oh, the irony!

Sharen attended Flatwoods Grade School and Sutton High School before earning

a bachelor’s degree in home economics from Glenville State College. She never used this degree but instead went on to get a master’s in correctional counseling from the West Virginia College of Graduate Studies. As a rehabilitation counselor with the state Division of Rehabilitation, Sharen was frequently unable to help those she worked with and had to rely on deputies to resolve certain situations. Due to her frustrations in that system, her former brother-in-law, a Marion County judge, suggested she go into law enforcement. Sharen decided that if she was going to take this route, she wanted to be a state trooper. The only issue was that the WVSP didn’t want female troopers.

Despite this obstacle, Sharen applied anyway. However, when she submitted her application, the WVSP mistakenly thought she was applying to be a secretary. She was quick to correct the error, letting them know she wanted to be a uniformed officer. Sharen recalls telling the department, “I will not be a desk person. I am a field trooper. I am going to the field.”

She was rejected on her first two attempts. “Women don’t have the same upper body strength as men,” she says, “so I could not pass the physical.” After two failed attempts in five years, Sharen decided there wasn’t a point in trying a third time. Something changed, however, in 1977; she later learned the WVSP would have lost federal funding on July 1 if it didn’t start hiring women and blacks. Seemingly out of the blue, the department contacted Sharen and asked her to apply in early 1977.

On May 16, 1977, Sharen made history when she was sworn in as West Virginia’s first female state trooper, but this was only the beginning of her struggle. On October 16, she began training at the WVSP Academy at Institute under Sgt. Carl Legursky, who was known for his intense training. He had been assigned for a short time to the Turnpike Patrol but was called back to the academy in August, only two months before Sharen’s cadet class was set to begin training.

“Nobody will ever convince me that he was not brought back on that hill [the academy]

to get rid of me," Sharen says. "The male cadets were upset because they couldn't cry, but I cried every day." In Sharen's view, Legursky "made life hell" for all the cadets, but the fact she cried "bugged the hell out of *him*." In one instance, Legursky called her out of line and scolded her while the cadets were at parade rest. The discussion got heated, and then, as Sharen explains, "I looked at him nose to nose, eyeball to eyeball, and I said, 'I will retire from the West Virginia State Police.'" The other cadets held their collective breaths. "You could have heard a pin drop," she says, and then Legursky walked away without uttering another word.

In March 1978, after months of rigorous training, Sharen graduated from the academy. She gives much of the credit to her fellow cadets who supported her. She also is thankful for others who buoyed her during her career, including Capt. Charles W. Ray, Lt. Richard A. Perry, Maj. Richard M. Hall, and Cpl. Stanley Booth. Her parents were also supportive, though they often reminded her of the dangers of being a state police officer.

On the other hand, many others openly opposed the first female trooper in state history. Fellow troopers often made comments or tried to embarrass her intentionally. Some troopers went farther,



Sharen poses (front row, fourth from the left) with her cadet class, October 1977. The woman to her right soon dropped out of the training. Immediately behind her is Fred Zain. He later led the State Police's serology department, where he falsified information about serum and other bodily fluids, leading to the convictions of countless innocent people.

such as tearing up her investigative reports. Sharen notes that one of her training officers, Dennis Foreman, checked in on her from time to time and once told her, "I don't think [other troopers] would get you intentionally hurt, but I think they would embarrass you."

The sexism Sharen faced was widespread. She was viewed as inferior by many troopers who wanted her gone. When she went to her first assignment, she was introduced to one trooper who refused to shake her hand because she was a woman. Sharen stared at him and said, "I'm not a woman, I'm a trooper." Though the trooper still refused to shake, he came to respect her, and the two eventually became friends.

Lack of respect wasn't the only issue Sharen faced. Since she was the department's first female trooper, there were no existing uniforms for women.

Her first one was an altered man's uniform. "They cut down a 14½ man's shirt," Sharen remembers. "My pockets were under my belt and under my arms." She wore this uniform for about six months. She laughs about it now but notes how it was even more challenging to obtain adequate underwear.

Though many WVSP leaders wanted Sharen gone, they seized every opportunity to thrust her into the media spotlight. "The first three years, I couldn't turn around unless it was in the newspaper," she explains. This gave the public an impression the department was making every effort to modernize and embracing the idea of having female troopers. Sharen went along with the PR campaign but grew to resent all the media attention, and many of her colleagues came to begrudge it. Looking back, Sharen feels badly about how that made others feel,



Sharen at work taking fingerprints (left) and investigating an automobile crash.

particularly the female troopers who came after her, “Nobody wanted to talk to them. They all wanted to talk to the first female trooper. . . . And there wasn’t anything I could do about it.”

During her career, Sharen had a wide variety of duties. After being sworn in, she was assigned to Cross Lanes in Kanawha County and, after graduating from the academy, was sent to Company B, Huntington Detachment. In August 1979, Sgt. W. W. “Corky” Walker asked Sharen to be assigned to Governor Jay Rockefeller’s security detail. She was initially hesitant because she wanted to be in the field, but as she puts it, “How do you tell the governor ‘no?’”

In this role, Sharen got to meet many celebrities and political dignitaries. She also developed

close ties with the Rockefeller family and still speaks very highly of how they treated her. She was particularly close with the Rockefeller children.

As if protecting the governor’s family wasn’t enough, Sharen also saved the life of Senator Robert C. Byrd. One day, before the dedication of the Ritchie County Industrial Park in Harrisville, she luckily noticed that Senator Byrd was walking in the wrong direction from the governor’s helicopter. As she tells it, “We had landed in this big field, and all the people were over there. The trooper, who was from Harrisville, was walking across, coming to us. I was standing there, and all the sudden, I realized that Robert C. Byrd wasn’t in front of me. I turned around to see where he was, and he was

heading straight for the back of the helicopter, straight for the rudder. If I hadn’t said, ‘Senator,’ and grabbed him by the arm, he would have walked right into it.” Talk about a close call.

In another first, on December 29, 1983, her son, Robert Alan Deitz, was born, making Sharen the first state trooper ever to give birth. At the time, the department had no guidelines for maternity or paternity leave, so Sharen was assigned to WVSP headquarters to write them. “I wrote all the general orders, all the guidelines, all the leave, everything for maternity *and* paternity.” Sharen had another child, Sarah—the second born to a trooper—on February 20, 1987. Robert Alan and his wife, Velmarie, now reside in Virginia, where he is a major



As part of Governor Rockefeller's security detail, Sharen carried out a wide array of tasks. On the left, she poses with John Denver in 1980 before he helped dedicate WVU's new Mountaineer Field. On the right, she and First Lady Sharon Rockefeller chat with Patti Church (far left)—the wife of national UMWA President Sam Church—and ARMCO employee Jeff Crutchfield before touring a mine at Montcoal (Raleigh County).

in the Army. Sarah is a senior consultant at Berry Dunn in Charleston. Sarah and her husband, John, are the parents of Sharen's only grandchild, Addison Elizabeth Ratliff.

After her son's birth, Sharen was transferred from the governor's security detail to headquarters and then to the turnpike. She came to love patrolling the turnpike and became somewhat of a legend there. She once pulled over three cars and two 18-wheelers at once. Her reputation quickly spread, and truckers started radioing one another to watch out for "Mama Bear."

During a pursuit in 1985, Sharen injured her neck and back when her cruiser hit a patch of ice and smashed into a cliffside. She was transferred to headquarters and promoted

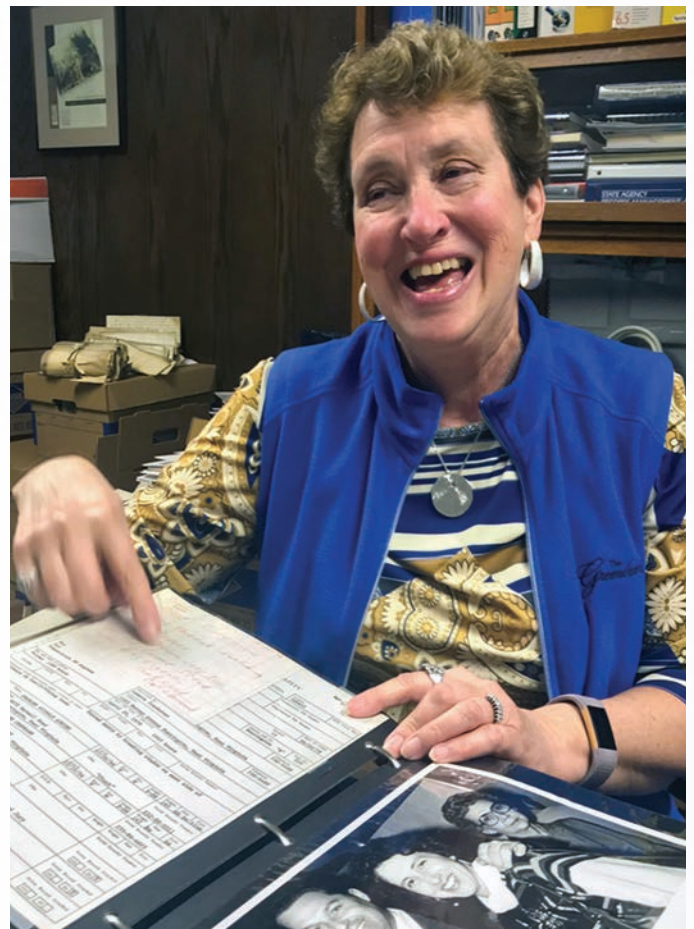
to sergeant in 1993. In 1994, among her other duties, she took on the role of compiling the WVSP's 75th anniversary book and a historical calendar. That year, she took WVSP history exhibits to various fairs and festivals.

Sharen retired from the WVSP in 1997, keeping the word she'd given in that nose-to-nose faceoff with Carl Legursky 20 years earlier. She'd already been active with the WVSP's Retired Members Association and continued to do so after her own retirement. She planned reunions and even tracked down Elma Taylor, the widow of Sam Taylor, our first state trooper back in 1919. Their relationship grew, and Elma told her many stories

Sharen believes that her main drive to be a state

trooper was her own stubborn determination. "It was something I decided I was going to do, and nobody was going to stand in my way or stop me," she says. She often fought the inherent sexism by "joking it off" even as it tore at her emotionally. "Every day when I was in the academy," Sharen says, "I'd look out the window, and I'd say, 'Okay, it's another day. . . . You can make it one more day.' And I'd make it one more day. I went through the same ritual every day. That's the only way I could do it. One day at a time."

Reflecting back on her career, Sharen thinks the part she enjoyed most was being close to the Rockefeller family and getting to meet all the people she did. The Rockefellers treated her with love and



(Left-right) Sharen in the 1990s (photo by William Tiernan, courtesy of Kenny Kemp and the Charleston *Gazette-Mail* Archives) and today (photo by Stan Bumgardner).

Sex Discrimination Lawsuit

Sharen is the only trooper to win a sexual discrimination complaint against the WVSP. "In 1993," she says, "I filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission when an unqualified male trooper was appointed director of Criminal Records." The WVSP

appealed the decision, which supported Sharen, all the way to the state Supreme Court. It upheld the lower decision and refused to hear the appeal. Unfortunately, Sharen had retired by the time she won her complaint and couldn't assume the director position.

respect, and for that, she'll always be grateful. The worst parts were being blamed for things that weren't her fault and not being given a chance by some fellow officers.

To sum up her career, Sharen says it was "the most physically and mentally exhausting experience I have ever had in my life." However, she's glad she

did it and proud she could overcome the chauvinism and other hurdles so future female troopers wouldn't have to struggle quite as much.

As we celebrate the WVSP's 100th anniversary, all the stories of heroism and lives saved, all those who've given their lives in the line of duty, and all the sacrifices that police officers make, let us not forget the walls that Sharen Sumpter Deitz tore down. In the face of doubt and scrutiny, she persevered and proved that she could be a woman and a trooper, too. 🌟