

OFFICER ENJOYS THE TASK OF SERVING AS A LIAISON TO IMMIGRANTS;

"BOSNIAN BARRY" BREAKS DOWN BARRIERS, BUILDS TRUST

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Byline: Phillip O'Connor; Of The Post-DispatchCITY OF ST. LOUIS; POLICE OFFICER; LIAISON; IMMIGRANTS; BOSNIAN

Body

As police searched in recent days for a half-dozen men wanted for last week's brutal attack at a Bevo neighborhood bar frequented by Bosnians, Officer Barry LaLumandier's pager droned almost constantly.

"Bosnian Barry," as many know him, serves officially as the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department's liaison to new Americans. But the title hardly defines the job.

As the point man in a program designed to help police open a line of communication to recent immigrants, LaLumandier finds himself, at times, serving as a diplomat, psychologist, social worker, furniture mover, chauffeur and, on occasion, police officer.

During the past week, he's been working the phones as a go-between, providing Bosnians with as much information as he can about the police investigation while relaying tips from the community regarding the suspects.

He calls the assignment his best in 29 years with the department and said he's received an education in world politics and cultural awareness to rival that available in any classroom.

"What's really neat is I'm afforded the opportunity to sit down with these people and try to really understand our differences," he said. "I absolutely learn something every day."

LaLumandier is stationed in a spartan office at the International Institute of Metro St. Louis, which is collaborating with the police and the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations to teach crime prevention and safety to refugees.

LaLumandier comes in frequent contact with people from Ethiopia, Vietnam, Laos, Somalia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and elsewhere who are making south St. Louis the city's newest melting pot.

Most refugees arrive in St. Louis frightened, suspicious of strangers and reluctant to reach out for help. Some were driven out of their homelands at gunpoint and with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Many spent time in squalid refugee camps before coming to the United States.

Many suffer varying degrees of post-traumatic stress disorder, LaLumandier said.

LaLumandier works to break down those barriers and earn the immigrants' trust. He's learned to say hello and thank you in most of the languages and admits to acquiring a taste for both Vietnamese and Bosnian food during his two years on the job.

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But his job isn't always easy. Even the clothes he wears can make it hard to establish a relationship.

While his pressed sky-blue shirt, creased navy pants, shiny black boots, badge and sidearm might be reassuring to most Americans, many refugees associate a uniform with fear - and even terror.

Anna Crosslin, head of the International Institute, says, "You have to remember a lot of these people are coming from places where people in uniform are part of the problem, not part of the solution."

Jasminka Grubor, a Bosnian outreach worker at the institute who works with LaLumandier, agreed that he often faces an uphill battle in establishing positive relationships.

"After the war, a lot of people don't trust too much and don't know how to deal with the law and what the consequences are," Grubor said. "I think it's getting better. But I think for trust, it takes a long time."

Customs can clash

Some of LaLumandier's days are mundane, spent on the telephone relaying information to supervisors, helping new arrivals understand the complex American legal system or responding to complaints. Just as some immigrants find it difficult to adjust to America, some Americans find it difficult to adjust to immigrants.

"They'll see their new neighbors doing something they don't understand and want to complain," LaLumandier said. "We get call after call after call about shoes on the front porches of Muslims."

The popular Bosnian custom of cooking a goat over an outdoor fire also prompted numerous complaints.

"Once they find out it's a religious or cultural thing, they stop calling," he said.

On other days, LaLumandier might meet new arrivals at the airport, transport crime victims to court hearings or help a family unload a truck of donated furniture. He'll often team with a social worker or an interpreter and visit homes, speak to community groups or distribute fliers containing safety tips or good-neighbor information in a variety of languages.

His worst days typically involve domestic abuse or child endangerment calls. Some immigrants have trouble understanding that leaving their children alone in an apartment all day or striking their wife or child is not allowed in this country.

"Sometimes I'll have to tell them I'm not trying to change their religion, I'm trying to teach them American law," LaLumandier said.

Though at times his work is frustrating, LaLumandier finds it rewarding. On his best days, he can save a life.

Vesna Sopovic, 44, met LaLumandier after her then-teenage son began spending all his money on drugs.

"Everybody told me that I just needed to kick him out from the house and let him go on his way, and I didn't like that way," said Sopovic, a Bosnian refugee. "I tried everything."

Then a friend put her in contact with LaLumandier, who visited the woman and her son in their home to explain the dangers and consequences of his behavior.

"It was amazing when Mr. Barry came the first time to my house," Sopovic said. "My son was so scared. That was the best thing that happened."

Her son has since moved out, but Sopovic said LaLumandier and a social worker continue to visit about once a week and keep tabs on him.

Sopovic said LaLumandier is "doing his job, but most important thing is that you can feel that his heart is involved."

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"It is most important that he is a very good person, not just a policeman. He tries to understand what we're dealing with. It's really hard to start a new life. Mr. Barry is my friend. He saved my life."

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Sunday profile

Name: Barry LaLumandier

Age: 50

Family: The St. Louis native is married and has three daughters.

Career: St. Louis police officer for 29 years, including stints as a patrolman and as a school-beat and public affairs officer.

Graphic

PHOTO (1) Color photo headshot - Barry LaLumandier

(2) Photo by WENDI FITZGERALD/POST-DISPATCH - Officer Barry LaLumandier, the police department's liaison to new Americans, listens last week to Nadsida Husic at her home in south St. Louis. Husic has been in the United States for five years.

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