

## Courageous Heart – The Human Behind the Badge

I began my career in law enforcement in 1986 with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. I was 23 years old, fit, and extremely excited to join one of the largest law enforcement agencies in the country, choosing a particularly fast paced station in South Los Angeles to learn my chosen profession. I loved my new career, and I saw it as part of my responsibility to maintain myself at the highest level of physical fitness. I've always enjoyed exercise so this was an easy part of my job. Yet a decade after graduating from the Academy, exercising daily and having a salad for lunch nearly every day, I was prescribed two medications to lower my blood pressure and another to lower my cholesterol. The doctor told me that my lab results showed, at just 35 years old, an increased risk of heart attack. I was told that prescription medications would simply now be part of my daily routine.

Research has repeatedly shown that law enforcement professionals experience disproportionately poor physical and psychological health when compared with the general population, and I was a perfect example of just how profoundly this career can impact well-being. I remember years of my life when I felt the sensation of wearing the protective vest never left my body, a lingering tightness corseting my chest even after removing the physical vest (perhaps a message from my body that the pressure of this career is immense). And at some point, though I can't recall exactly when, I started to find that a drink or two at the end of a shift gave me a temporary reprieve from this "anxious feeling" around my chest. Eventually my sleep started to suffer, feeling surges of energy too early in the morning (what I now recognize as cortisol, our "stress hormone," surging from my overactive nervous system). It became normal for me to manage only five or six hours of sleep a night. I developed irritable bowel syndrome, a condition not well understood but often attributed to "anxiety" or worry. As my blood pressure continued to increase, despite my persistent exercise and healthy eating, my doctor just continued to instruct me on taking my medications and exercising. But despite everything that I knew about diet and exercise, and despite taking my prescribed medications, my symptoms persisted.

That all changed in 2015 when I attended a three-day course on mindfulness and resiliency. This course provided me new insights and allowed me to feel energized and excited about our profession in a completely new way. Within days of incorporating meditation practices into my routine, my feelings of anxiety almost completely resolved. I don't think it's overstating it to say that this three-day course changed my life (quite unexpectedly), and exponentially increased my well-being (also very unexpected). As my practice continued over weeks and months, I stopped wanting that drink at the end of the day, my sleep improved and I started feeling well rested again, my gut felt settled, and my blood pressure returned to normal - **without the medication!** Experiencing such profound changes from mindfulness interventions, I wanted to immerse myself into this field with the hopes of improving my own understanding and sharing this with my colleagues. I've since pursued additional mindfulness training, including Compassion Cultivation Training<sup>1</sup> (CCT), and ultimately worked with the Compassion Institute on developing the "Courageous Heart – The Human Behind the Badge" program (CH).

In developing Courageous Heart – The Human Behind the Badge, the Compassion Institute set out to offer a program similar to Compassion Cultivation Training based on a foundation supported by scientific research. They assessed the value and application of the CCT approach in comparison with the MBSR (mindfulness) oriented programs. They found that compassion-based skills towards yourself and towards others are essential healing elements in the police experience. Mindfulness alone can be helpful in managing stress short term, but it does not appear adequate in addressing the isolation, emotional repression, and deficits in social support so common in our profession.

Today, the Compassion Institute offers Courageous Heart in half-day introductory workshops and three-day “intensive/deep dive” retreats covering mind-body awareness, self-compassion, processing emotions, managing empathetic distress, building connected human relationships, challenging interactions, and finding purpose and engagement at work. There is also the option of a series of six weekly on-line interactive group meetings to reinforce practice, address challenges, and deepen understanding. Ultimately Courageous Heart alumni are encouraged to enjoy the standard eight-week class, and CH alumni also have the ability to engage with other CH & CCT alumni in an on-line community lounge and forums offered at [www.compassioninstitute.com](http://www.compassioninstitute.com).

“Courageous Heart – The Human Behind the Badge” has been offered to law enforcement agencies throughout the Bay Area and San Diego, and will be highlighted at this year’s IACP Conference in Chicago. Feedback from pre and post-intervention surveys and testimonials indicate broad success with participants from all levels and stages within law enforcement, from late career captains and chiefs to non-sworn agency personnel and relatively newly sworn active duty officers. Courageous Heart appears to successfully provide self-reported benefits consistent with research conducted by CCT:

- Improved emotional experience and resilience; decrease in emotional suppression and worry
- Ability to respond thoughtfully, be less emotionally reactive
- Improved self-care, and ability to give compassion and receive compassion from others
- Skills to manage “challenging” interactions without depersonalizing the individual involved
- Improved family, social, and professional relationships
- More positive and inclusive emotional outlook and engagement in their life’s work
- To be present with suffering while maintaining healthy boundaries

Given the crucial responsibility of police officers to serve and protect, in addition to their authority to physically handle and arrest civilians, it is vital that they have access to care, services, and training to maintain optimal physical and psychological health. This is in the best interest of the officers, their families, community members, and the broader law enforcement system. As public safety leaders, we must ensure our personnel have these resources. For more information about the Courageous Heart program, and testimonials from participants, click here: <https://www.compassioninstitute.com/specialty/public-servants/>

Robert Jonsen, Chief of Police for the Palo Alto Police Department  
Be Fit. Be Well. Be More!

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