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Burs' dedication sets shining example

Editor's note: This is the first in a regular series that will feature local individuals who have done something to make a difference in our community. See page four for information on recommending someone to be featured in this series.

By JACK P. TERCEÑO

Police Sgt. David Burs didn't have to worry about being included earlier this month on the list of town employees who took more than 15 sick days in a single year.

Burs, who has served Stratford as a police officer for 16 years, has served the last 11 years without missing a single day.

A Stratford High School and University of Connecticut graduate who made a name for himself as a tailback on the schools' football teams, Burs has since proven himself a tough player in life.

As on the football field, Burs has often had to adjust to different challenges and assaults during his years on the force.

"I've learned through maturity to adjust to adversity," said Burs. "One day you're up, one day you're down."

From the time he took the police officer exam, Burs said, he has been adjusting to adversity.

He took the exam at the urging of a high school friend who was a Stratford sergeant at the time. Out of 600 candidates, Burs scored fourth.

However, challenges by the town concerning his physical



qualification for the job delayed his entrance into the police academy, he said.

First he was told his ankles and knees were bad from playing football, which was not true; then the 6', 205-pound college tailback was told he was borderline obese.

Then came accusations of a heart murmur and high blood pressure, all of which Burs' doctor shot down until finally the town hired him.

In an odd scenario of reverse discrimination, Burs, a black man, said he later heard he was being shunted aside because the department thought he was white and wanted to hire more minorities. He said he never filled in the race on his application, and at the time he was living in Ashford, a predominantly white community in northern Connecticut.

He finally fought his way through; however, the delay cost him a full year of seniority on the job.

Though much of his time is spent on the front desk at police headquarters, Burs still splits his duties between that, training new officers and going out on patrol.

Burs leads a group of officers from Manchester and Wallingford that trains all new police candidates across the state. He also recruits and trains new officers for Stratford.

Burs said the police internship he developed at Wallingford for UConn in 1979 is still being used.

Now, having been a sergeant for six years, Burs said he is looking forward to making lieutenant. He said the security and benefits of being a Stratford cop will keep him at the job, and he already has his sights set on the job he wants to tackle next: head of training in Stratford.

The job is currently held by Burs' good friend, Lt. Andrew Knapp.

"Nobody's given me the opportunities Andy has," Burs said. "He's made a big difference in my attitude as far as career goals."

Burs said he is hoping Knapp will soon make captain, which would leave the head of training position open.

"David Burs is the biggest fan of Andy Knapp making captain," Burs said, smiling.

Giving something back

When he was a kid growing up in Stratford, Burs spent a lot of



SGT. DAVID BURS

time at Sterling House Community Center. He learned a lot while involved in the center's many activities, and the experience helped shape the man he has become.

So when the center's martial arts teacher stepped down two years ago and Burs was asked to replace him, he did not hesitate.

"That's a payback for Sterling House," said Burs. "They gave me scholarships when I went to college. The people at Sterling House have been good to me my whole life."

Burs teaches self-defense classes to women and children. He said he has considered beginning a class for adult men, but is concerned things might get too vio-

lent.

With the women, Burs teaches basic self-defense and how to avoid and escape bad situations. His class covers fairly easy tactics that don't rely on a person's size.

The kids get lessons in tumbling, tossing, kicking and jumping.

"They have all that energy," said Burs. "They watch Power Rangers® and they want to see that kind of stuff."

Burs holds an instructor status in Tae Kwon Do, but said he is primarily focusing on grappling these days.

"Right now I try to concentrate on the grappling arts," he said. "It makes a lot more sense than punching and kicking."

Burs lives on Soundview Avenue with his wife P. Benoit — who he said has to be "awfully patient and flexible" to live with him — and their daughters Danielle, 10, and Rachael, 8.

Danielle is already 5'4" and plays basketball at Sterling House. Burs said he spends as much time as he can — which is sometimes not much given his 14- to 16-hour work days — working with the Sterling House team.

Both Danielle and Rachael are also advanced students, and Burs said he and his wife expect great things from them.

As for himself, Burs said he hopes to leave the force at an administrative level. In the meantime, he follows a simple maxim: "Maturity, professionalism and just doing what you're told to get the job done is a priority."