

Bob: Hello and welcome to The Illinois Professional, a campaign created by Illinois Human Resources to showcase the diverse ways that employees carry out and support the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign mission. In the wee hours of the morning, most Champaign-Urbana is winding down. But for some university staff positions, the day is just getting started. I'm Bob Dignan. And in this episode, we'll be chatting with Sergeant James Carter of the university police department. Sergeant Carter has established himself as a leader and someone who his coworkers feel they can approach for guidance and assistance. So much so that Sergeant Carter was awarded the 2020 Chancellors Distinguished Staff Award. The award is designed to annually recognize civil service staff employees for their exceptional accomplishments and service to the university. Through this program, outstanding performance is encouraged in all civil service staff employees as they strive to win this prestigious award. Enjoy this conversation with Sergeant Carter and the fascinating detective work involved in his time at the university.

Bob: Sergeant Carter, thank you so much for joining the podcast.

Sgt. Carter: Thanks, pleasure to be here.

Bob: So this series is all about getting to know the award winners of the Chancellor's Distinguished Staff Award. Congratulations on getting that.

Sgt. Carter: Thank you.

Bob: So, that's obviously recognizing great, the great work that you do and that goes around, goes on in your area. But for those listening that may not know all of that. And I'm not going to try to fill in all those gaps you're the expert on you. Could you start us off by explaining what you do and also how long you've been at the University.

Sgt. Carter: Currently, I'm a patrol sergeant and I work midnight shift basically in charge of probably 5-6 people throughout the course of the night. Day-to-day situations we get calls that come over the radio. 9-1-1 calls theft, burglary, armed robbery. You know, pretty much just a wide spectrum of crimes that come up. We get CIT calls where students are having some form of mental crises. And we're the first responders show up to help coordinate and facilitate them getting some services or referrals.

Bob: Wow! How long you've been at the university?

Sgt. Carter: I've been at university since January 2011. And prior to that, I worked at Illinois State University Place department for three years before I laterally transferred here.

Bob: Got you. So you've been in university police departments for awhile. What I want to get into some of the more interesting aspects of your job. But first, why work at a university? There's lots of different jobs that somebody with your skill set and career trajectory could go into. But what about a university's struck you?

Sgt. Carter: Well, when I was a student at Illinois State University, I met a few police officers that work for ISU-PD and they turned me on to the field and they told me one day once I graduate, I might want to look into, you know, a career in law enforcement. So being introduced that way by university police officers the first place I looked for employment as a police officer was at a university, and a few years later, they did in fact hire me there to be a police officer. And that's what brought me to the University

of Illinois because after I graduated, we, my wife and family lived in Champaign, so I was commuting to ISU. Then there was a call for lateral officers to come to the University of Illinois Police Department. And my wife saw the article in the paper and she said, you need to find a job closer to home. And she handed me a newspaper article, so I applied and they hired me which is what brought me to this wonderful place.

Bob: Excellent, excellent. So I'm curious what to you are some of the main differences of being on a police department that's affiliated with the university versus even some of the Champaign or Urbana police departments. What types of things do you get into that are maybe a little bit more unique?

Sgt. Carter: Well, I mean, just being a university police officer. We have so many different diverse groups that are here on campus, the different colleges, international students, student groups, athletes. You also have like a flow of dignitaries that show up here on campus. And you know, it's just a really, really unique experience to work here. And literally, every day you come to work, you cannot guarantee what's going to happen. You know, lots of interesting things come up. Sometimes problems arise, but that's why we're here.

Bob: You talk about not sure what will come up and that you're on the midnight shift was talking to a building service worker where talk about the midnight shift is real kind of low key. Not a whole lot going on cleaning up buildings at the midnight shift. But at a, in a campus town, the midnight shift things sometimes start to pick up. So that's gotta be kind of a different experience to be working nights on a college campus as opposed to somewhere else.

Sgt. Carter: Yeah. Yeah. The activity tends to pick up later in the week we get. So on Mondays, Tuesdays. Sometimes Wednesdays are pretty mild. Right around Thursday, especially when we've got a lot of kids on campus and they tended to get into a celebratory mood. You know, things tend to get out of hand sometimes, you know, kids being kids but we do what we can to help out.

Bob: I love that, the way of phrasing that celebratory mood. Yes. So your nomination write up for getting the award talked about some real like pivotal assignments that you were involved in. And I wonder if you could just touch on those briefly, including somebody trying to hack into university data. And you were involved in that case as well as the kidnapping case.

Sgt. Carter: Yeah, that's correct. So so prior to my promotion to the rank of sergeant, I worked in the Detective Bureau, so I was actually investigator for 3.5 years. So there was a there was a student, an Electrical and Computer Engineering student that had done a few activities. He glued a couple professor doors closed. He had hacked into people's computers, put in key loggers. And he basically had access to a lot of private and privileged information. Social security numbers, UIN numbers. And he actually went through the process and reverse engineered I-Cards so that he could enter a building under somebody else's credentials. So throughout that investigation, I interviewed a lot of people in the department, a lot of the students, and I really got a lot of feedback from them on who they thought was capable. Were there any personality types, any hacker type people that they were familiar with and his name kind of started to come up a little bit more often than others. So, I focused on that individual. I actually went to his residence one day over Christmas break just to kind of snoop around a little bit. And I found a package on the front porch and it's against the law for me to touch any mail, but it's not against the law for me to read it. So I read the name on the package and it was actually one of his one of his handles that he used on a 4Chan blog. And it matched. So, based on that and a

couple of other pieces of evidence that I was able to link to him, we got a search warrant for his place and seized his computer and solved that hacker case.

Bob: Well, thank you for all that work. I know you don't need the thank you for me and you got the award and the promotion and such from there. But one of the things I'm thinking about is the digital age of investigations and how much, you know, digital evidence you're needing to sift through and there's not, you know, physical as much physical evidence of crimes. And that's gotta be like a a a whole changing landscape in police work.

Sgt. Carter: Yeah, yeah, it is and pretty much much, especially with University, they own everything so anytime we need to get any digital information it has to come from CITES and it has to go through legal, and we have to apply for a search warrant or subpoena whichever we require specifically for that investigation. So, we did in fact get a search warrant from the state's attorney's office, pass it off through legal, and it went through CITES and we actually got it approved to actually go through and comb through the computers that we seized and electronic devices that we seized during that search warrant.

Bob: Well, that's interesting because were you kind of cutting your teeth on more of like a digital type crime activity, criminal activity, or had you already had training and experience in that?

Sgt. Carter: Funny, you should ask. That was that was actually like my first real case. I mean, I was a rookie detective and it was like the first, like, hard case that I actually got. I had one e-mails spoof case that I worked prior to that. Figured that one out. So, my detective sergeant at the time thought, well, you did okay with this, you know, digital crime and see what you can do with this one. So, I'm kind of dogmatic about stuff like that. And anytime there's a question or, you know, a hard problem that needs to be solved. Take pride and, you know, kind of digging in to see if I can actually figure it out. So I'm I'm not a tech wizard at all. I just, I just like to dig and I pay attention to detail and, you know, it's it's paid off a few times for me in my career.

Bob: Yeah, definitely. One of the other times like we were mentioning. Has your involvement with the kidnapping of Yingying (Zhang). Can you recap for those listening what your involvement and there was?

Sgt. Carter: Yeah, so I was I was actually at class over at Champaign police department was basically continuing education course training course for police officers. And I spoke to a co-worker and he informed me that there was an international student that had gone missing them. I really he's like, yeah. He said "you didn't know that was going on?" I said no I've been off work you know, the last four days and then my first day back was training day. So I really didn't have any clue. So after class was over that day, I came back to our department in watched there's where the investigation balance is located. And then I noticed the conference room that's normally closed 364 days a year from the the bureau was open and it was just full of people and there's people writing on white boards. And I mean, it was a pretty chaotic experience. So instead of going in that room, I went to the left where, you know, there were a couple of investigators at cubicles working on some some quieter things so I asked detective Hetrick, what they were doing and he told me they were looking at video footage and they were trying to see if they can make out the registration plate on the vehicle. And so I asked if you mind "do you mind if I sit down and, you know, kind of look at the video for a little bit" and he said, "Sure, go ahead," so, for a couple of minutes to like, you know, blow up the picture, you know, go frame by frame and see if you could actually make out what the license plate was. But the more you the more

you do that, the more, you know, it pixelation and I thought it was impossible. So I started to look for, you know, some sort of anomaly or something different that damage defects, something that would basically set that car apart from other make some models in the same year. So, I spent a little time looking at it, slowed it down, went frame-by-frame backwards, forwards. And then I notice that there was a dark spot on the right front wheel cover. So, I said ok, you know, it still could be like pixelation digital. So, I went slow motion backwards and I watched to see if the pixelation just popped up in certain spots while I was looking at the video or was it consistent as the car moved backwards and forwards across the screen. And then I noticed that that void that I noticed was consistent throughout the entire video and from other cameras that the vehicle was spotted on. So, at that point, I knew that that wheel cover did in fact have a piece missing and I told detective Hetrick I said and go and go in there and then those guys the car they're looking for has a chunk missing out of that wheel cover on the right front side.

Sgt. Carter: Definitely. So that at the moment, that doesn't translate to as much information as a license plate number would, but it narrows down the search entirely. So you can be much more focused on what you're looking for and how to verify what you found matches the video evidence.

Sgt. Carter: Yes. And they actually had a list of those vehicles it was a 2009 Saturn Astra or 2010. It was only produced in one year. So that made it a little bit easier because it's a rare vehicle.

Bob: Right.

Sgt. Carter: So I think there were 58 of them registered in the state of Illinois, and I think maybe forgot how many were actually registered in Champaign. And of course may did the canvassing. They went out, interviewed everybody and own that particular vehicle or had one registered in their name in Champaign County and Brent Christensen was one of them. So they had they had they had already went out and Canvased. They already interviewed him. And then that piece of information, there was an FBI agent that noticed when they went speak the Christiansen that his car actually had that chip missing out of the hub cap. So, they went they went back and readdressed Brent Christensen after that.

Bob: Right, so they could verify that link. Wow, yes. We've been asking people on the, on the series if they can think of a day or a moment where they felt most proud to be an Illinois professional. I'm sitting here wondering in the back of my head if your involvement with this case might hit that hit all the buttons for you on filling most proud of. Is that the case or do you have another day or moment that you think about?

Sgt Carter: Well, I mean, without doubt, that particular investigation, that day we figured out it was him was definitely the highlight of my career. It's not very often, you know, especially, you know, working at a university police department, you get to participate in a missing person/homicide investigation. Also, those those are very, very very serious cases nonetheless. And, you know, the amount of time and work and attention to detail that goes into, those investigations are exponentially higher than your regular theft or criminal damage case, because somebody's family member is missing.

Bob: And the whole the whole campus community was banding together to provide help and closure and assistance and all of it. So, you are a part of that. And that leads me to one of the last questions that we have is just how you see your role even at the midnight shift doing those patrols. How did you see that role fitting into the mission of the university?

Sgt. Carter: Well, you know, providing a safe environment where students, faculty and staff enjoy higher education, different experiences, meeting people, and then having some assurance that if something were to go wrong, that there are people that work for this institution that care and want to help. I mean, this honestly, why I do what I do here.

Bob: That's amazing. Well, again, congratulations on winning the award. Do you happen to remember what was going on when you found out you want this campus wide award?

Sgt. Carter: I got an email, you know, it's kind of shocking because nobody told me that I was even nominated for it long so when I got a confirmation email. And then the subsequent phone call, you know, how was I was shocked and happy and proud and everything else and yet humbled by the experience also.

Bob: Well, great. Do you have anything else you want to add? Any other unique aspects of your job or things that you wish people knew more about what you do.

Sgt. Carter: Just that, you know, in spite of all the things going on, you know, that society is dealing with, you know, you still have law enforcement officers who put on a uniform and wear a badge that care, that are concerned and that are actively working towards providing people with security and transparency.

Bob: And I'm sure those listening are very thankful for all that service that you're doing. So, I think that wraps it about up. Thank you so much for joining.

Sgt. Carter: Okay. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Bob: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Illinois professional. If interested in nominating someone for a campus staff award. There's a link in the description with more information. And be sure to follow @IllinoisHR on Twitter for informational and inspirational posts.