

On the Record with: Huntley Police Chief Robert Porter

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HUNTLEY – Coming out of high school, Robert Porter wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life.

After starting junior college and accepting a construction job, Porter decided to tag along with his uncle, a Downers Grove police officer, at work. Suddenly, his future became clear.

That launched Porter into a career in law enforcement. After nearly 29 years with Downers Grove, including 15 as the chief, Porter accepted the head job with Huntley's Police Department and began in October.

Porter sat down with reporter Caitlin Swieca to talk about his transition to Huntley and the challenges of the current police environment.

Swieca: You started work on Oct. 12. How's Huntley been to you so far?

Porter: They have been outstanding. I am truly humbled by how I've been received. This [first] week, I've spent a lot of time with elected officials, a lot of time with community leaders. I've gotten phone calls from people, emails from people. Everybody just raves about this community. The department here has been outstanding and so helpful. For a new guy just trying to find his way in and out of the building, it's a big adjustment, and the staff has been just tremendous to work with. I can't say enough about the village, community, its leaders. This week has been a whirlwind, but it's been fantastic.

Swieca: There's always an adjustment moving from one place to another, and you had been with Downers Grove for almost 29 years. Huntley is a smaller community. What do you anticipate being the biggest adjustments here?

Porter: I think just getting to know people and getting to know the streets, the community itself. Police work is police work. There's things in Downers Grove that will relate to issues in Huntley, and vice versa, but really just getting to know the community and the geographics of the community will be a big adjustment.

Swieca: Huntley has experienced huge growth over the past decade. What are some of the challenges that come with that?

Porter: Growth typically means an increase in service and trying to supply the appropriate services with a defined number of resources. It's something that all municipalities face. Right

now, the state situation is weighing heavily on all of our minds – what’s going to transpire there – so that’s one challenge with growth. Also, making sure you have the appropriate level of training for some of the issues that large communities face. When you’re a smaller community, you tend to start seeing an increase in those types of activities.

One thing I have found, the staff here does a phenomenal job of wearing multiple hats and doing a lot of different things, a lot of different responsibilities. The community outreach programs here are fantastic. A lot of feedback I’ve gotten from the community is just the different relationships with the police department here is something to be proud of.

Swieca: From what you can tell, what is the character of the department?

Porter: I think it’s still a relatively young department. We have a lot of very solid policies in place. We’re fully accredited. I am a big believer in national accreditation, especially in this time that we’re in. This police department is very prepared, and having the appropriate policies and procedures in place.

Swieca: In this area and nationwide, there’s been a lot of conversation surrounding police work lately. Do you think the climate right now is more challenging than what you’ve faced before?

Porter: Absolutely. This is the most noble profession in the world, as far as I’m concerned. I’ve been doing it a long time. I’m from a police family. But right now, with a lot of the negative incidents and coverage across the country, it has made it difficult for police officers. It really emphasizes the importance of getting those good deeds out there and the good work that you do, and the positive police community relations. You can’t get enough of that. It’s something I feel Huntley does a great job of, and I’m looking to build on that in the future.

Swieca: What are ways to build that goodwill?

Porter: Getting out of the car. Talking to the public. You see a lemonade stand on the side of the road, go out and buy a glass of lemonade. Go to community events. Let people see you. Put a name with the face and the badge. The more we do that, the better. We do a great job with that here.

Swieca: You mentioned being from a police family. What’s your background there?

Porter: Both my uncles were police officers, and myself, so three of us.

Swieca: Did you always know you wanted to be a police officer?

Porter: When I graduated high school, I went to a junior college and was working as a laborer in construction. I realized early on I wanted something more. First of all, I wasn’t very handy, so that’s a bad combination with construction. I started doing some ride-alongs with my uncle in Downers Grove, and I was pretty much hooked.

I decided this is what I wanted to do. I wanted to be involved in service. Police work, to me, was a dream. You’re experiencing something different every day. You have the ability to make a

positive difference in somebody's life. I love the team aspect of being a police officer. That's why I made that decision.

Swieca: What do you think it was about you that led Huntley to select you?

Porter: One of the things I've heard is that I do have my background in staff development. I'm a big believer in working with my staff, making sure they have the education, the training and the tools they need, trying to develop them for leadership positions. I've had several deputy chiefs from Downers Grove that have gone on to become chiefs in other communities. That's a passion I have, is teaching and working with my staff. I've received some positive feedback from Huntley officials that that really helped.

Swieca: You were the president of the Illinois Chiefs of Police. How did that experience help you grow?

Porter: That was an incredible experience. It was a lot of work at the time, but it really helped me in the area of consensus building. You're trying to unify a whole state to agree on legislative issues, training issues. Obviously, there's a lot of different opinions out there, so it helped me in that aspect. I've had a lot of experience in legislative processes, working with legislators on both sides of the aisle on different bills that are out there. Media, lot of media interviews, press conferences, things of that nature. It really gave me experience in a lot of different areas. I've met hundreds of police officials. It's given me a real perspective on how things are done, both at larger agencies and smaller agencies, working with all different sized police agencies across the state. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was one of the best experiences of my career.

Swieca: Are you currently a part of the organization?

Porter: Right now, I am one of the legislative leaders and also a member of the executive board as a past president.

Swieca: So you have a good pulse on the situation with the state budget?

Porter: Absolutely. One of our big concerns right now is that a lot of the training funds are not being released to police departments. We have a very large legislative bill that was out there that changes some of our procedures, and we'd have to offer a certain level of training. But right now, those training funds are not available to us. A lot of police agencies are concerned about it. We've been educating our legislators, letting them know our concerns. At this point, that's all we can do.

Swieca: What kind of things do you like to do outside of police work?

Porter: I'm a die-hard Cubs fan. I love sports – Blackhawks, Cubs. I like to run – to go walking and running. I like to read.

Swieca: What kind of stuff do you like to read?

Porter: Really, everything. Police stories. I like to read biographies about sports figures. The last

book I read was a Tony Dungy book. I love reading John Maxwell and books on leadership.

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