

Police chaplain to be honored for her work

John Dugan | Marin IJ Article Launched: 02/25/2008



Rev. Jan Heglund, a chaplain for the San Rafael Police Department and the FBI, says she has helped officers with post-trauma counseling, as well as being available to them for any other advice they need. (IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel)

The Rev. Jan Heglund is one of the few ministers around who wears a bulletproof vest to work. The Fairfax resident likes it that way.

Heglund, 71, is chaplain for the San Rafael Police Department and the local FBI office. For the past 13 years she has suited up in a bulletproof vest twice a month to ride with members of the police force, a job she does in addition to her role as deacon at Christ Church in Sausalito.

Soroptimist International of Marin County, a nonprofit women's organization, has named Heglund the winner of its Making a Difference for Women award, saying her police work in a profession dominated by men "raises the horizon for all women."

"She is an inspiration to all women," said Paula Kamena, former Marin district attorney and a spokeswoman for Soroptimist International. "Her upbeat spirituality and her passion about her work are a shining example of how one person can make a difference in the world."

Heglund's responsibilities as a police chaplain involve trauma counseling for police officers and both crime witnesses and victims. She said she often gets called out to crime scenes simply to act as a "pastoral presence" in a situation.

"If you walk in wearing a (clerical) collar, it defuses the situation," Heglund said. "People feel much more at ease around a reverend, so it makes it easier to talk to them."

Heglund said she first became interested in becoming a police chaplain in 1995, after reading a newspaper story about San Rafael police starting a chaplaincy program. She said she was immediately drawn to the idea of serving as a police chaplain.

"Bells just went off in my head," Heglund said. "I went in and I remember thinking, 'This is me.' I didn't even know what the job was yet, but I knew it was the place for me."

Since then Heglund has become a renowned police chaplain. In 2003 she became the head police chaplain throughout the North Bay and currently works with two other chaplains to serve the area. Heglund works most closely with San Rafael and San Francisco police.

"Jan has a wonderful way about her. When she listens, she really has the ability to make you feel that she understands what you're saying," said Joel Fay, a San Rafael police officer and volunteer with one of Heglund's special recovery programs, the West Coast Post-Trauma Retreat. "And she's great at keeping secrets. When she hears something, she never repeats it. She's very trustworthy."

Heglund has also been working with the FBI for five years, in the training academy. A friend who worked with the FBI told Heglund the agency was looking for a chaplain. Heglund was reluctant to take on another responsibility at first.

"I said, 'That's all I need, one more thing,'" Heglund said. "But someone told me I can do both, because they are so different. Working with police and working with FBI trainees are two very separate jobs."

Heglund said she most often deals with post-trauma counseling for police officers, but she remains available to them for any sort of advice they need.

"She will take over a situation, talk to those involved and put them at ease," said San Rafael police Sgt. Wanda Spaletta. "We're there to do the nuts and bolts and make sure everything is done right. She comes in and talks to people and listens. She's fantastic."

Heglund said it wasn't easy at first getting police officers in San Rafael, where she works with two other chaplains, to utilize her services.



Rev. Jan Heglund was given this crystal cross from members of the San Rafael police department in appreciation of her service as the chaplain. (IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel)

"I figured they weren't going to trust me unless I was around all the time, so I just started hanging around the station," Heglund said. "I just had to be patient. I knew they weren't going to come running up to me on the front steps."

Once Heglund became a success in San Rafael, other cities wanted to employ the chaplaincy program. Mill Valley and Sausalito police talked to Heglund before implementing the program, and each asked Heglund to take over chaplaincy duties at their stations.

Heglund declined but set up each station with its own chaplain. She's kept busy by getting involved in other trauma counseling services, including the West Coast Post-Trauma Retreat. The program, which tends to trauma-afflicted emergency specialists and victims, originally held three retreats a year, but was such a success Heglund and company have begun staging them every month.

Heglund returned Friday from the most recent retreat, held in Inverness. Now it's back to work with the San Rafael police.

"Law enforcement chaplaincy is my passion," Heglund said. "There's no more privilege to me than getting a call in the middle of the night to come out for the police department. As strange as it sounds, that's what I love."

AWARDS DINNER

Soroptimist International of Marin County will honor the Rev. Jan Heglund at its "Soul Patrol" awards dinner, set for April 26 at The Club at McInnis Park in San Rafael. For information, call event chairwoman Colleen Finney at 457-6444.