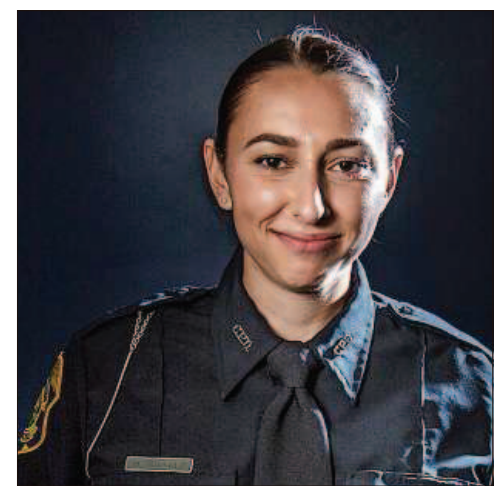




**THE NEW RECRUITS**

# THESE DAYS, WHO WANTS TO BE A COP?

Six months inside St. Petersburg  
College's police academy



STORY BY LANE DeGREGORY | PHOTOS BY JOHN PENDYGRAFT | *Times Staff*

**T**hey can't get over the wall. It's 6 feet tall, made of smooth wood. Nothing to hold or stand on.

Even the tallest men are struggling.

"Run at it. Get a grip. Haul yourself up," shouts a coach in a red shirt. "Don't give them a huge target."

You never know when you're going to have to chase a suspect over a wall.

It's a drizzly day in late September. The police recruits are lined up behind St. Petersburg College's Allstate Center, between the rifle range and shoot house.

Three weeks into training, they've learned to keep their eyes on the door, do push-ups on cadence, tell reasonable suspicion from probable cause, frisk someone, search a car and carry coffee in their left hand so they can grab their gun with their right.

This morning, they're starting the obstacle course that's designed to predict their perils: crawl under a fence, slither through a tube, hoist yourself into a makeshift attic.

They're slick with sweat, covered in dirt, cheering each other on.

"You got it! Come on! Keep going!"

If you fall, you have to start over.

"You have three chances," the coach says.

In the real world, you might only get one.

Clockwise, from top: Hannah Anhalt wants a profession that "will make me proud." On the obstacle course, Brittany Moody is formidable. Anhalt's brother texts her every night: Did you die today? For former NFL player KeVonn Mabon, talking to strangers is no big deal. Moody wants to show her son that not all cops are bad. Graduates will have to wear body cameras. Mabon didn't tell his boyhood friends he was going to be a cop.



Coach Joe Saponare, who oversees training, times the recruits between classes. If they don't pass the physical fitness test, they get kicked out of the academy.

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Class 219 is mostly white and male, but it is the most diverse yet, said Joe Saponare, who oversees recruit training at St. Petersburg College's Law Enforcement Academy: seven women, five Black people, two Latinos. Half went to college. Six were in the military. The youngest, age 19, lives with his parents. One of the oldest is raising a son. She's already earned a nickname, Mama Moody.

Some registered for the academy last spring, before George Floyd died, before people took to the streets demanding that governments defund the police. They decided to attend anyway.

Others applied because of those outcries.

They know they will be insulted, targeted, hated — some critics will be openly hostile. But 30 young people signed up for the first class since the pandemic closed the academy.

Saponare, whom cadets call "Coach Sap," expected applications to plummet after the protests last year. Instead, he said, more people than ever applied.

No agency tracks how many people apply to U.S. police academies, according to the National Police Foundation. Anecdotal evidence from the country's 18,000 law enforcement agencies is contradictory. Some departments are struggling to fill vacancies. And officers are quitting at record rates, many after only a few years.

In September 2019, even before the protests, the Police Executive Research Forum released a report about the "workforce crisis." It said the job of policing has become more challenging, as officers grapple with social issues like mental illness, and new types of criminals, like those who deal in cyberspace.

St. Petersburg police Chief Anthony Holloway, an officer for 35 years, said last summer was the first time he questioned whether he still wanted to serve. "It felt like everybody was against us," he said. "I'd like to see the naysayers see what our officers have to deal with every day."

The new batch of officers should be a hybrid of old-school meets new ideas, Holloway said. He wants recruits who want to be part of their community, not just bust bad guys. "I want us to be like the fire department: When we come into your streets, we're here to help, not hurt you."

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After lunch, on this Sep-

tember day, the recruits sit at long tables in the classroom, with highlighters and textbooks. A coach walks them through "Psychological Stressors for Veterans."

"So many of the people you deal with are in crisis," says the coach, who was an officer for 32 years. "It's hard for them to focus on what you need them to do, just to get them to answer questions and follow simple instructions."

He shows them a video of a veteran begging a cop to kill him, another of a drunken Marine attacking an officer. He encourages them to be empathetic but not put themselves in jeopardy. He warns them about PTSD and how they are going to see things not everyone sees.

One officer he knew turned in his badge the first time his life was threatened. "If you have doubts, talk to somebody," he says. "It's not a sign of weakness."

He explains how to deal with juveniles — and their parents. Tells them some homeless people don't want to go to shelters. He's about to move on to the next chapter when he stops, closes the book and looks up.

"I'm just curious," the coach says. "With all the news all across the nation, with everything you're seeing going on, why would you want to be a cop?"

No one answers.

"We used to get a lot of respect. But that's all changed," he says. "Now everything we do gets questioned and second-guessed."

The recruits stare at their laps. The coach says, "There's no bad answer."

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To get into the academy, candidates have to go through extensive background checks, physical and psychological exams, written tests and intense interviews. About 20 percent won't make it to graduation. By the end of the first month, two cadets in Class 219 will drop out and another will fail the first test.

Some have been sponsored by the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, the St. Petersburg Police Department, Clearwater, Largo. Others paid \$4,000 tuition, hoping an agency will hire them by graduation.

Most of the training is mandated by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and at the end, recruits have to pass a state test. Individual academies can add to the curriculum, but not to the duration of the academy.

In St. Petersburg, coaches revamped some training in



Academy recruits are required to give presentations to educate or inspire their classmates.



At the academy, cadets have to march in step, exercise in sync and keep their name cards straight.

October 2019, having cadets focus more on defensive tactics than offensive moves, emphasizing de-escalation. But last summer's protests didn't really spark any changes, Coach Sap said. "We just reiterate that there's a ban on chokeholds," he said. "We teach them how to get out, escape, but not to do it on a suspect."

The academy has a team of 40 coaches, mainly current and former police, all adjunct. Like the recruits, the coaches are mostly white men. Class 219 has six Latino instructors, five female coaches and two who are Black. During the

training, coaches always wear red shirts.

Classes are held in a blue, two-story building in southern St. Petersburg, on a sprawling campus bounded by U.S. 19 and I-275. Training lasts almost six months, Monday through Friday, from 7:30 a.m. until 4:45 p.m.

Mornings start with the recruits raising the American flag to recorded bugle music. And every day, someone reads the name of an officer killed in the line of duty.

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In the classroom this afternoon, the coach calls on each

recruit, in alphabetical order.

A white woman whose brown hair is in a bun sits up straighter in the front row, then turns to address the room. "I want to get away from a desk job, do something more fulfilling," she says. "I want to come home at the end of the day and know I made a difference."

Hannah Anhalt, 25, majored in criminal justice at the University of Central Florida, got a private investigator's license, uncovered fraud for an insurance company. The job paid well, but she found it boring. When the pandemic shuttered her



**Brittany Moody** scrambles over a wall as she becomes the first woman in her class to conquer the obstacle course. She played five sports growing up and works out every morning before the academy.



**Hannah Anhalt**, aka "Jane Wick"



**KeVonn Mabon**, aka "The Rabbit"



**Brittany Moody**, aka "Mama"

office, and she started working from home, she told her boyfriend she needed a new career.

A former Marine wants to be a hero. A blond woman wants to help strangers. A fair-haired man grew up with a rough family, lost both parents young. "Police were called to my house a lot. They really helped me," he said. "I want to help people like me."

One recruit wants to take bad people off the streets. Another misses the camaraderie he'd had in the military. Someone else wants to save juveniles from sex trafficking.

"My uncle and family

friend are in law enforcement. And they're great men," says a muscular Black man. "There's a lot of good people out there who want to do the right thing."

KeVonn Mabon, 27, was a wide receiver at Ball State University. In 2017, he got picked up by the Tennessee Titans and played in four pre-season games. He was playing football professionally in Germany last year. When the pandemic hit, he moved to Florida to live with his pee-wee football coach and got a job in a gym. Then that shut down. So he applied to work at the jail.

A recruiter with the Pinellas Sheriff's Office saw his application, offered to pay his tuition to the academy and, if he graduates, hire him as a deputy. Mabon thought about it for a few days. He didn't tell any of his childhood friends. Most of them hate cops. Some are in prison.

A Black woman wearing glasses tells classmates, "I grew up in a rough area outside of Baltimore, seeing drugs and alcohol abused." Everyone she knew, she says, felt like the police only came to arrest and harass, not to help.

Brittany Moody, 31, is the

second-oldest recruit. She has a 7-year-old son and helps parent her partner's middle-schooler. She had thought about becoming a cop for years, but everyone around her tried to talk her out of it, asking, "Why would you want to become a pig?"

For the last three years, she worked in the uniform department at the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office and in the jail commissary. The summer's Black Lives Matter protests strengthened her resolve to become a deputy.

"As the mother of a Black son, I want to help make a change in policing — from

the inside," Moody says. If she had been one of the officers on the George Floyd or Breonna Taylor call, she says, she might have been able to save them.

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Over the next five months, the recruits will learn how to clear buildings and carry their partners out of harm's way, how to respond to suicide attempts and school shootings, how to speed through slick U-turns, disarm suspects, revive overdose victims.

They will have to pass 18 written tests and six "high-liability" proficiency exams,



**Hannah Anhalt**, here crawling through part of the obstacle course, says that becoming a cop "sounds scary." She's never been in a fight. Her fiancé worries about her, and her dad keeps telling her, "You could still be a Realtor."



Workouts are grueling and have to be done in sync. If one cadet doesn't dip low enough in a push-up or can't keep up with the sit-ups, the whole class has to start over.

prove that they can master 28 defensive moves and spend 80 hours on the firing range.

They will be indoctrinated to see threats everywhere. And they will be told — every day — that they might die in this job.

The culture of policing, in 2021, is still paramilitary, valuing aggression and machismo, dividing humanity into good guys and bad guys.

These recruits will have to police communities that don't trust them, and police each other.

Coaches will reinforce the need for accountability, and how everyone is watching police nowadays, scrutinizing behavior. They'll tell the cadets that they have to earn the public's trust. And they will repeat, again and again, that the biggest problems are individual failings.

Several recruits will struggle with the physical training. Others with the academic tests. Some will question their decision.

Will they still want to do this job once they learn about the life they're facing? Once they've been shot with simulated bullets and seen scenes of screaming, bleeding children, after a cop at the U.S. Capitol dies and a Hillsborough deputy is killed on his last shift before retiring?

"To me, it sounds scary. You're risking your life. You don't even know what's around the next corner," says Anhalt, the woman who used to work at an insurance company.

The book work will be easy, she says. She's always been a good student. But she doesn't know how to load a gun, and she's never been in a fight — never even felt threatened.

Of everything she's facing at the academy, she says, all the trials and tests, the thing that freaks her out most: being blinded by pepper spray.

"Nobody really wants me to do this," she says. "Am I crazy?"

### Week 5: Pepper Spray

"True story," a coach tells the cadets. "This could happen to you."

The 27 recruits are lined up along the driving course behind the academy, wearing gym shorts and white T-shirts, sweating under the October sun.

Several are wearing glasses. No contact lenses today, they were told. Those will only make your eyes burn more.

"Not too long ago, not too far from here, a state trooper pepper-sprayed a perp on the Howard Frankland Bridge," the coach says. "Wind blew it right back into the cop's face. The guy picked up the trooper to throw him into the water. But the trooper shot him. Justifiable homicide.

"You need to know how incapacitated it can make you if someone uses it on you."

Don't panic, he says. "Don't go flapping your arms all around out there. We'll laugh at you! When you get done, you're going to shower. Don't bend over or the contaminant



More than anything, Hannah Anhalt feared being pepper-sprayed. "It feels like someone is cutting my eyeballs with glass," she says.



How do you shoot a gun when you can't see, Anhalt asks as she tries — and fires straight into the bull's-eye.

is going to run down to parts of your body you don't want to burn. And don't come running down the hall naked. We've had that. It's time to cowboy up and take a little pain."

An ambulance is standing by. Two paramedics watch the cadets crowd around an eye-wash station made out of PVC

pipes, a hose and a shower head. Bottles of baby shampoo wait below.

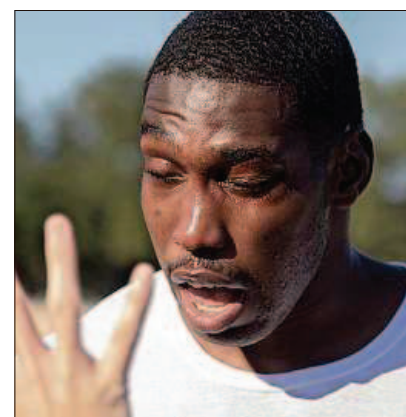
Around the asphalt, coaches have set orange cones — four stations the recruits must run to after being shot in the face with pepper spray.

"You'll have to pick a partner, someone to guide you.

You won't be able to see," says the coach. "Hopefully, you'll always have a partner. Or at least back-up."

As soon as the coach sprays them, they have to define one of the "levels of resistance." The coach yells: passive, active, aggressive or deadly force.

Officers are allowed to



KeVonn Mabon struggles to open his eyes to count a coach's fingers so he can proceed with the exercise.

respond with one level higher than the threat coming at them.

At each station, they have to perform a defensive technique they learned last week. At the last stop, while their eyes are still burning, they're supposed to grab their gun and fire into a target.

Mabon is ready, eager to get it over with. Moody had meditated on it that morning, and found peace.

Anhalt admits, "I'm terrified."

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After five weeks at the academy, the recruits have learned knee spikes and ankle kicks, how to unlock handcuffs and break up a party, to differentiate human trafficking from smuggling, when to read Miranda rights, how to de-escalate a situation with "verbal judo."

They've learned what not to do, too, from a cop turned lawyer. "Don't be stupid," he warned. "Don't be a pervert. Don't molest females. Don't have sex on the hood of your cop car, even if you're in a cemetery. Dead men don't tell tales, but dash cams do.

They've memorized the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics: *To serve the community, to safeguard lives and property, to protect the innocent against deception. ...*

They've watched videos of a guy who killed his kids and stuffed them into barrels.



Coaches keep shouting at Brittany Moody to fight through the pain of the pepper spray. "You gotta fight like you mean it. It's a life or death battle!" a coach screams.



With baby shampoo at the ready, Hannah Anhalt hits the eye-wash station after being pepper-sprayed. Why put recruits through the pain? "You need to know how incapacitated it can make you if someone uses it on you," a coach tells them.

Analyzed crime scene photos of a human head on a shelf, a shooting victim who bled out, a man who put a bomb in his mouth and exploded all over his bathroom.

They've talked about how cops are targets, more than ever.

One cadet was driving home with his uniform hanging in the backseat and a guy on a motorcycle flipped him off.

Anhalt scraped the *Blue Lives Matter* sticker off her car.

"I don't know anything about defensive tactics. I think as I get more training, it will become less scary," Anhalt said. "At least I hope so."

She grew up in Davie, just north of Miami, and trained as a gymnast. Her dad mostly raised her and her older brother. In high school, a friend's mother, who worked for the Secret Service, invited Anhalt to shadow her on "Take your daughter to work day," which sparked her enthusiasm for law enforcement.

She's always loved shows like *48 Hours* and true-crime podcasts like *Sword and Scale*. "My boyfriend is always saying, 'You're going to kill me, aren't you?'"

Tyler Dressel, 29, is a wine vendor. They met in college and have been together six years. He supports her but worries. She's 5-foot-3, 130 pounds. Could she hold her own against big guys and people with guns?

"It's a very dangerous job," Dressel said. "But I know she'll be good at it. She can be intimidating. And she doesn't take any BS. Other people will see her as a cop. But I know, deep down, she's a sweetheart."

Over the summer, they got engaged and moved into a house in Dunedin with their two greyhounds.

"Of course, I want to help people," Anhalt said. "I'm a people person. I also need to do something for my future. I want to make myself proud."

She calls herself "pro-police," though long before a jury decided on the George Floyd case, she felt he was murdered.

"Something needs to change with the training," she said. "You have to have other officers' backs, but also be able to bring them down, de-escalate things. They need good cops out there now more than ever."

The \$50,000 salary will be enough to help support a

family. She wants to have a family. And after 20 years on the force, she said, retirement benefits will be sweet. If you make it that long.

"My dad keeps telling me, 'You can still be a Realtor,'" she said.

He's an optometrist, who fitted her for contact lenses when she was in fifth grade. All those years of wearing contacts, he said, might make her eyes extremely sensitive to pepper spray.

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"Okay, you ready?" a coach asks Mabon at 9:30 a.m.

He's by the eye-wash station, rocking in his sneakers. He's always moving, bouncing like a boxer. "Hands behind your back," says the coach. "Don't touch your eyes."

Mabon takes a deep breath and throws back his shoulders. The coach, barely a foot away, squirts a stream of pepper spray into each of his eyes. He winces, shakes his head.

"Okay, now look at me," shouts the coach. "C'mon, c'mon, look at me." He can't open his eyes. "How many fingers am I holding up? You gotta look at me!"

He squints, and can barely make out her hand. "Four?" he guesses.

"Okay," says the coach. "Go!"

The other recruits watch, knowing now what's coming.

Moody is up next and takes off her glasses. When the pepper spray hits her eyes, she stomps, slaps her thighs, tugs her shorts. "All right, active resistance," yells the coach. Moody shakes her hands, coughs. "Active resistance!" the coach calls.

She spits out the definition, then takes off, eyes closed, running in the wrong direction. "This way!" calls her partner. "Follow my voice."

She makes it to the first punching bag, then doubles over. "Hit it! Hit it hard!" says Coach Sap. Moody keeps missing the bag. "They're trying to hurt you!" the coach screams. "You wanna go home? You gotta fight like you mean it. It's a life or death battle!"

She stands still for a second, shakes her head, tries to focus. Behind her burning eyes, she pictures her son waiting for her. She opens her eyes, tears washing away the pepper, and starts unleashing all her anger and fear on that bag, determined now, shouting, "Police, get back!"

She just had to remember what she was fighting for.



Brittany Moody and Anhalt try to cool their aching eyes with a fan after being sprayed. During the exercise, an ambulance and two paramedics are standing by if needed.



Having to run blindly and relying on a partner while their eyeballs burn helps the recruits bond, academy coaches say.

When it's Anhalt's turn, she tries to stay silent. But as the pepper hits her face, she whimpers. It takes her twice as long as anyone else to open her eyes. "Okay, go!" the coach finally shouts. "Go!" Anhalt veers to the left, way off course. Her partner calls her back, but Anhalt doubles over coughing. Snot is spewing from her nose, dripping off her chin.

"Breathe!" says her partner. "Calm down! Open your eyes." She punches at the first station, runs to the second, then steps back from the kick

bag, gagging. "Get angry!" screams Coach Sap.

Somehow, she makes it to the final stop, pulls out her gun — and fires straight into the bull's-eye.

"You did it! It's over. Calm down," her partner says, leading Anhalt to wash her face. She squirts baby shampoo into each eye, gasps as the water carries pepper spray down her neck.

"I can't breathe!" she cries. "Your face will cool down. You got this!" says Moody, putting her arm around Anhalt's shoulder.

"Get your hands off her!" shouts a coach. "Stop babying her! You can't do that on the street."

Moody backs away. Anhalt swallows tears. "It feels like someone is cutting my eyeballs with glass," she says. "Like my face is melting."

In the classroom that afternoon, two former Marines say that was more painful than being gassed. Was it worse than childbirth? someone asks Mama Moody. "It's right up there," she says. "But there's not the happy ending."

It makes me wonder, one



**Hannah Anhalt tries to gather herself for class after being pepper-sprayed. Anhalt is one of the few recruits paying \$4,000 tuition at the academy. Most of the other cadets already have been hired by local agencies.**

female recruit says: Should police be allowed to gas protesters? “Now I feel bad for them.”

At the end of the day, Anhalt still can't open her eyes and has to call her fiancé to drive her home. She can't see the academy textbook to study for the next day's exam, so he has to read to her.

That night, for the first time since she started the academy, she breaks down. She had paid her own way to attend. She hasn't been hired by an agency yet, doesn't owe anyone anything.

“What am I doing?” she cries to her fiancé. “Why am I doing this?”

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The day after being pepper-sprayed, Anhalt still can't see. She has to catch a ride to school with another recruit and keeps leaving class to rinse her swollen eyes.

She's in the bathroom when Moody comes to get her. “The Clearwater PD is here to see you.”

Anhalt dries her face and tries to blink back the pain as she greets the officer waiting in the hall.

“We've been watching you,” the man says. He admired her drive, had seen progress in the physical training and been impressed by her problem-solving skills. “We want to offer you a patch.”

Just like that — after one of the worst days of her life, one

of the best. If she graduates from the academy, and passes the state exam, Clearwater police will refund her tuition. And hire her.

First, she has to learn how to shoot a moving target, tackle a suspect, tie a tourniquet.

And talk to strangers at Walmart. “That's the part I'm dreading the most,” Moody says. “I'd rather be pepper-sprayed.”

### Week 6: *Walmart*

She doesn't want to do this. “Not. At. All. I'm not ready,” she tells the other cadets.

They're wearing their uniforms, ties and shiny shoes, finishing lunch on this Friday in late October. They're getting ready to move onto the next assignment: Interviewing.

“I don't know what people are going to say. If I'm shopping, I don't want people bothering me. Especially a cop,” she says. “Especially now.”

Moody rarely complains. Not when she got punched in the face during boxing, or kicked in the shin during a take-down, or thrown on her stomach and handcuffed.

But she's been dreading this day: The recruits must talk to strangers.

“Is someone going to hit us?” Moody asks. “Will we

have to use our defensive tactics?”

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For some people, this part is easy. Much better than having to run 1.5 miles in 100-degree heat, learn dozens of legal definitions or tackle a suspect on a gravel road.

Moody sees it as torture. Coach Sap laughs at that. What did you think this job was? Most of your time, you spend talking to strangers. You gotta get used to this.

It's generational, he says. When he was coming up 30 years ago, people still talked to each other. Face to face. All the time. And phones were

not for texting.

Some of these millennials — or are they even younger than that, Gen Z's? — anyway, they don't talk even when they're in the same room, Coach Sap says.

“It's getting worse every year,” he says. “That's why we got to get them out there, practicing their communication skills.”

Six weeks into their training, Class 219 has lost six recruits. One's infant got sick. Someone caught COVID.

The 24 who are left have learned how to fall and break falls, the difference between an interview and an investigation, how to holster a gun,



**Most people at Walmart won't want to talk to cops, Brittany Moody says, and she dreaded the exercise. KeVonn Mabon, on the other hand, enjoys engaging with strangers.**

approach a burglar, take fingerprints, collect evidence and handle a body when its skin is stuck to the floor.

All but four already have been hired by local agencies. Everyone except the youngest is keeping up with the physical training. But that affects them all. When one person doesn't pump enough push-ups, they all have to start over. Cadets started making the 19-year-old work out at lunch, Mabon drilling him as if he were training for the NFL. While others eat at the long tables, Mabon counts squats and sit-ups.

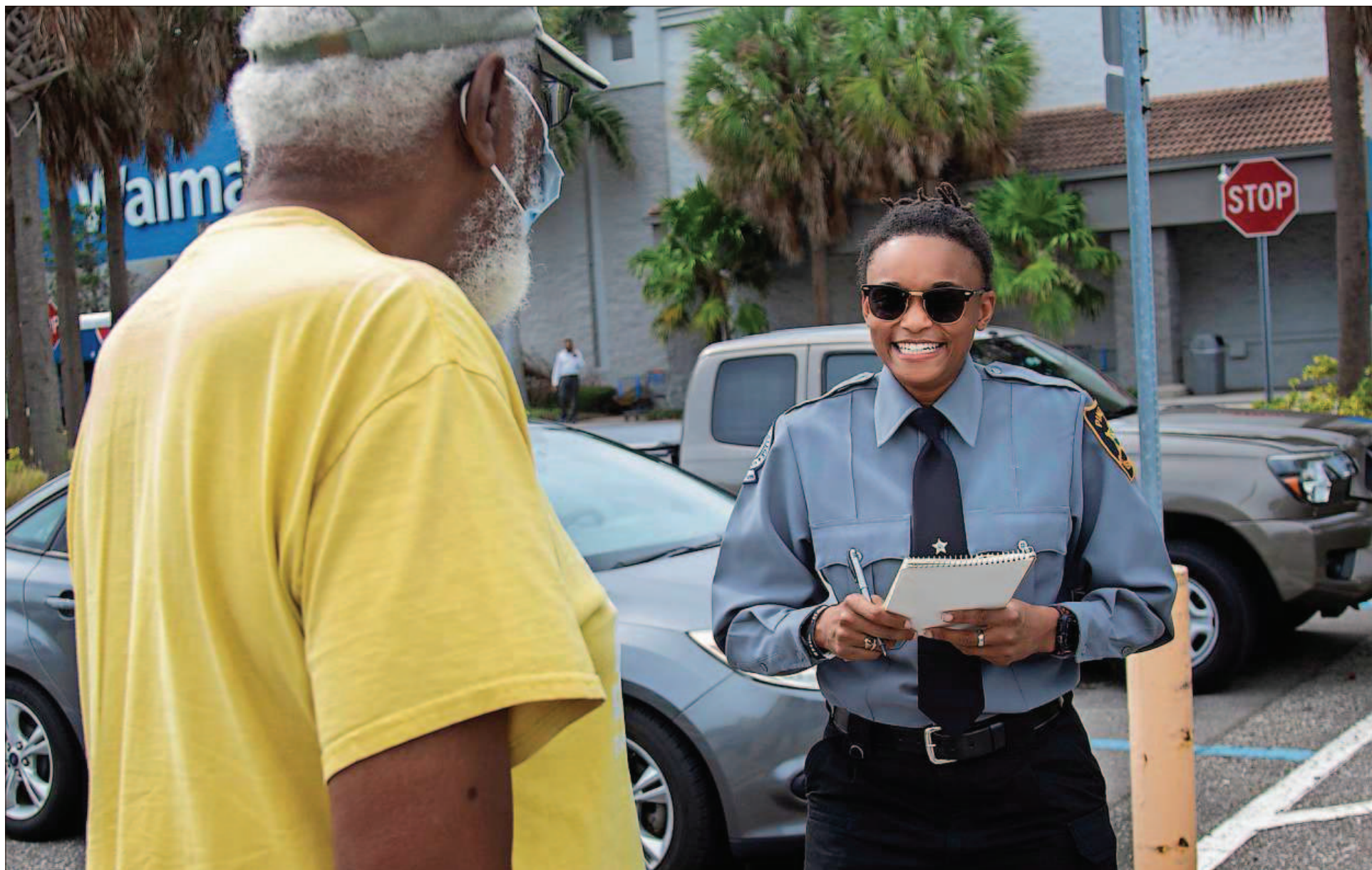
“I'll talk to anyone,” Mabon says that Friday as they clean up after lunch. He turns to Moody. “You got this.”

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Take really good notes, a coach tells the cadets.

“Notice tattoos and piercings, write those down. After the interviews, you'll all be up here at the podium reporting back to us. So make sure you can read your notes. Get quotes. They have to be direct quotes. Get their first and last name and occupation. Use small notepads, don't open your laptop in front of them.

“Avoid generalizations. Ask follow-up questions. What does that mean? Every call you go on, you're going to meet two or three people, at least. And you'll have to talk to all of them. You can't be shy.”



**Be courteous. Make eye contact. Find a connection, a coach tells cadets. Here, Moody does that with Walter Canty, 73, who used to work near where she grew up.**

Surely some of you have been face-to-face with strangers before, the coach says. “What other jobs have you had?”

Security. Dog track. Receptionist at a chiropractor’s office. Army. Marines. Cable guy. Server.

“You have to explain quickly why you’re out there, what you want,” the coach says. “Anybody have the hee-bie-jeebies?” Half the class raises their hands. “Just work through the fear. Today, our mission is to find out what their perception is of law enforcement officers.”

Someone groans. Others exchange glances. Moody hangs her head.

“If they’re anti-law enforcement, ask: What can I do to change your perception?”

He projects a map of Walmart on the screen behind him. It’s right across the street from the police academy. “Try to get people approaching as opposed to leaving. They might want to get their groceries home. Don’t go inside Walmart,” he says. “And remember your interview stance: feet shoulder-width apart, gun leg back. Be nice. Be human. Try to make a connection. If someone gets in your face, back off.”

Moody doesn’t have a notebook. Mabon needs a pen. They team up, and stake out a spot by the garden center.

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“Excuse me, sir,” Mabon calls to a middle-aged Black man walking through the parking lot. The man doesn’t stop. Mabon catches up to him. “Can I ask you a question?” The man shakes his head. The next woman does the same.

“We should’ve gone to Publix,” Moody says, “where people are happier.”

It’s hot in the afternoon sun. The air smells like asphalt. The cadets are sweating in their long-sleeve dress shirts and polyester pants. “Excuse me, ma’am,” Mabon says, approaching an elderly Black woman. “I just want to get your opinion on law enforcement.”

“Well, that’s a big topic,” says the woman. “You mean, locally?”

“How do you think the officers who’ve been deemed bad can be better?” asks Mabon.

Police need to get out into the community, she says. Build relationships. Know who they serve. “Yes, ma’am.” And you have to train them so their response isn’t excessive, she says, make them show some respect. “Yes, ma’am.”

And you’re in danger, too, she tells him. Protect yourself. Protect your partner, she says. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Moody puts on sunglasses, watches people slide by, gears up for rejection. When a Black man wearing a Vietnam vet ball cap nods at her, she nods back. “How you doing, sir? Can I ask you a question?” The man stops. “I just want to get your opinion on law enforcement.”

“I tell you what,” says the man, chuckling. “It’s a whole lot different than when I was in law enforcement.”

“Oh, you were in law enforcement?” asks Moody.

“Yep, 23 years, retired now, from Washington, D.C.”

“That’s where I’m from!” Moody says. “Well, I’m from Baltimore.” For the first time all day, she smiles.

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She has wanted to be a police officer since she was 7, her son’s age. Her dad was a security guard at George Washington University, and as a girl, she loved watching him put on his uniform, felt proud that he protected people.

“I wanted to do that,” Moody said. “Help people.”

Moody’s parents were high school sweethearts, and she and her older brother grew up with them coming to her volleyball, softball, soccer and basketball games. She was 10 when they split up, which “took a huge toll on me,” she said. Her mom worked at the post office and took a transfer to Tampa when Moody was in seventh grade.

In high school, Moody played sports, studied karate, hung out with kids who hated cops. Her grades started slipping, she was acting out, getting in trouble.

During a presentation at the academy, she showed a photo of her back then — wearing a sleeveless navy undershirt, baggy khakis slung below her hips, a big, gold cross necklace. Then she showed a photo of her in



After recruits line up at the academy, Brittany Moody helps raise the flag.



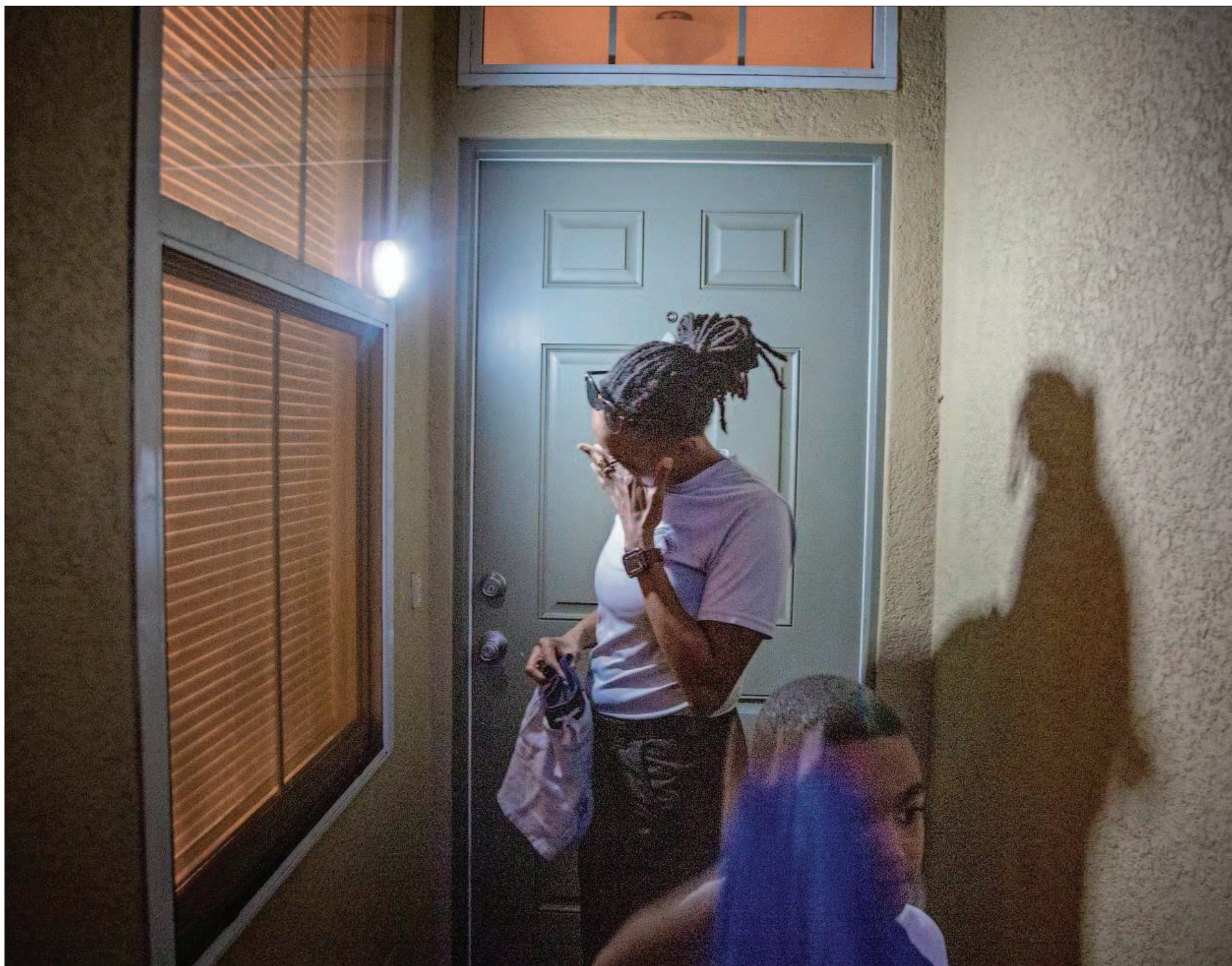
“Perception is everything,” Moody tells the recruits, sharing photos of how she has transformed since high school. “You are what you put out into the universe.”



Moody gives each of her academy classmates a tulip, with the buds unfurled, symbolizing that they are about to bloom.



Moody ties shoes for her son, Bryan, 7, in their Brandon home. Her days during the academy start early — 4 a.m. — and can run late. “I’m super exhausted all the time,” she says. “But there’s no doubt in my mind that I want to do this.”



After an exhausting day at the academy, Moody races home to grab her son for basketball practice. She seldom has time to herself, or to sleep.



While her son Bryan is at basketball practice, Moody studies her basic training book and flashcards.

shirt and tie. She talked about perception, how she'd had to change and cut off everyone around her, shut down social media. "You are what you put out into the universe," she said.

At the University of South Florida, Moody studied criminal justice but didn't get her degree. She worked at Burger King, Cold Stone Creamery, Ikea.

Her son was born when she was 23.

He was a surprise; his dad is her best friend; they met bowling. They co-parent from separate homes. Now, she said, "We're like brother and sister."

After Bryan was born, Moody decided it was time to pursue her passion. She applied to the academy, sailed through the physical tests but failed the written entrance exam. Twice. So she took a job at the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office handing out uniforms, learning what deputies do.

Finally, last summer, she was accepted into the academy — and the Sheriff's Office sponsored her. If she graduates, and passes the state exam, she'll be a deputy.

"Just because you fall down doesn't mean you stay down," she said.

Moody lives in a townhouse in Brandon with her girlfriend, her girlfriend's 12-year-old son, her boy

and a friendly pit-bull mix named Maggie. Every morning, she gets up at 4 a.m., drinks a protein shake, packs lunch, meditates, then carries her sleeping son to her truck and drives to her mom's house. She eases Bryan into bed beside his grandmother about 5:45, kisses him goodbye, then drives another 45 minutes to the academy to run 3 miles and do CrossFit training with Coach Sap.

After all day at school, she picks her son up and heads home by 6:30. Except twice a week, when she takes Bryan to basketball practice at the YMCA. She helps the second-graders warm up, running drills and rebounding their shots. When practice starts, she sinks into a folding chair on the far side of the gym and takes out her basic training textbook, highlighter and flashcards.

"I'm super exhausted all the time," she said. "But there's no doubt in my mind that I want to do this."

She doesn't want Bryan to be scared of cops. She wants him to know they are here to help.

Moody's mom, Stephanie Johnson, said she was surprised when her daughter told her she wanted to be an officer, "especially in light of all the stuff going on right now."

"She's a Black female with

alternative sexual orientation, raising a small son. I told her, 'How many more things do you want stacked against you?' But she won't entertain a negative comment about what she's doing. She's very driven. And stubborn."

She doesn't test well, her mom said, but she's a good leader. "She's going to impact lives, change perceptions. The

Sheriff's Office is lucky to get her."

Of course, Johnson is worried. She's a mental health counselor now, well aware of the psychological, as well as physical risks, police face.

Once her daughter is on the streets, Johnson said, "I'm going to have to be on prayer all day."

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In the Walmart parking lot, the man in the Vietnam vet hat asks Moody about her dad's work in security, how long she's been at the academy, how she's doing. She does most of the talking.

Then she remembers her assignment. "So you said law enforcement is a lot different than when you were in it," she says. "How?"

The man strokes his white beard and says slowly: "People in policing now, they come from an environment of bullying. They need training, someone to teach them to help and be kind." Moody races to write down his words. "And when the police break the rules," the man says, "you have to hold them accountable."

They talk a little more, and Moody thanks him "so much" for his time. "I hope things will change with training, and whatever else it takes," she says.

"Good luck to you," says the man.

Back in the classroom, the cadets compare notes. Some shoppers praised law enforce-

ment or had officers in their families. Many refused to talk.

A nurse told one recruit that to some people, her Black teenage son looks like a thug. But he isn't. "Don't be too quick to judge." Instead of arresting autistic kids, cops need to learn to talk to them, a teacher said. A cafeteria worker told a cadet, "Don't be trigger happy."

Moody tells classmates about the man she met. She was supposed to talk to at least two people but only interviewed him. "He said police need to grow up and take responsibility for their actions or fire them," she says. "A lot of officers are getting in trouble and nothing's happening."

A youth counselor told a female recruit that sheriff's deputies have always been rude, then called her a "paramilitary a--hole."

"So what have we learned today?" asks the coach.

Nothing they didn't already know: Lots of people hate cops.

It's good to keep that in mind out in the field, when a suspect is holed up in a building, and you're the only thing between him and jail.

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#### COMING WEDNESDAY

Week 12: *The Shoot House* and  
Week 14: *Cop Cars*



"Don't be trigger happy," a woman tells a cadet outside Walmart during an exercise to practice interviewing skills. Another shopper, the mother of a Black teenage son, tells the cadets: "Don't be too quick to judge."