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Moonlight Patrol

Careers: Two movie industry professionals spend off-hours fighting crime as reserve deputies. In some ways, the jobs aren't all that different.

By Robert Wynne

By day, Jeff Zacha and Rob Kenneally carry cell phones. In Burbank.

At night, they carry guns. In Compton.

Every other weekend, these movie executives peel off their business suits for tan-and-green uniforms--guns and badges in place--and head out on patrol as Los Angeles County reserve sheriff's deputies.

"Whenever I've taken a friend on a ride," says Kenneally, a Brentwood resident, "they say, 'My God, you were having lunch with [ABC President] Ted Harbert today and now you're eating a Boys Burger in the 'hood in South-Central after reporting a homicide.'"

Zacha, 39, a supervisor of post-production for Disney, and Kenneally, 35, executive vice president of Rysher Entertainment, met 11 years ago while training as reserves. They couldn't decide between law enforcement and show business, so they chose both.

Working part-time with the Sheriff's Department, they patrol West Compton, East Rancho Dominguez, Walnut Park, the Florence-Firestone District, Willowbrook and Lynwood.

When on patrol, they are miles away in distance and demeanor from their full-time professions.

Westchester resident Zacha is the liaison between filmmakers and Disney studio executives. He reviews budgets, hires editors and oversees technical standards.

Kenneally supervises production for several hours of programming, including "Robocop" and "Lonesome Dove," and seven feature films, including the upcoming Howard Stern movie, "Private Parts."

Going on patrol, they said, provides a counterbalance to the Hollywood glitz.

"Given that we both work in a fantasy world, it's an incredibly strong balance," Kenneally says. "It's very therapeutic."

Zacha agrees. "It puts your problems into perspective."

Both said they were attracted to law enforcement as young men. The interest has stayed with them.

“When I first started,” Zacha says, “it was a little strange, the dichotomy, the two different worlds. Now it gels into one.”

Zacha said film work and police duty both involve “the ability to act calmly under a tremendous amount of pressure and to come up with a way to resolve the problem. That’s my job [at Disney], and that’s my job [on patrol].”

Co-workers are impressed by their odd moonlighting.

“We always try and give back to the community in some way,” said David McCann, a Disney senior vice president and Zacha’s boss. “This is Jeff’s way, and I think it’s terrific.”

On occasion their two worlds have merged. When Kenneally was a FOX TV network executive in 1988, he helped develop the hit show “COPS.”

“I was one of the people who said we ought to do a cop show and put a video camera in the back seat” of patrol cars, he said. “If people at home had the same enthusiasm as [civilian ride-alongs], I knew it would be successful.”

The duo are two of the Sheriff Department’s 495 reserves in the Level I classification, the highest part-time deputies, many of who go on patrol. They go through most of the training of regular deputies and have the same authority as other sworn officers while on duty. In Los Angeles County, there are 900 reserve deputies. The program attracts doctors, lawyers, computer programmers and other professionals.

Zacha and Kenneally may be the only movie executives who work Level I; they are certainly the only ones who work at the Century police station, said Lt. Gil Jurado, the second-in-command.

Century station ranks No. 1 per capita out of 21 Sheriff’s Department stations in serious crimes such as, murder, rape and robbery, Jurado said.

That made it even more attractive for Zacha and Kenneally.

“I really wanted to know what it was to be a cop,” Kenneally says. “The promise of Firestone-Lynwood was you would be involved in felony arrests and see police work as a real policeman would.”

Their wives support their weekend work, though they worry about them getting hurt.

Zacha’s wife of 16 months rode along with him one night before they married to better understand what he does.

“She thinks it’s great,” he said. “She’s very confident of my abilities.”

Kenneally’s wife is less enthusiastic. “When she married me, she knew this came along with the territory. If she could, she would rather I didn’t do it,” said Kenneally, who has a 6-month-old daughter.

In the past, the two have been in several dangerous situations in which they had to use their guns, though neither has shot anybody or been shot.

In several instances, for example, suspects at the end of vehicle pursuits have fired on them, Zacha said.

A recent Friday night proved relatively calm for this area. Still, they experienced everything from the tragic to the lighthearted during the shift.

Early in the evening, driving along Laurel Avenue between 94th and 95th streets, Zacha asks a group of men and women playing cards, "Is everything all right?" With a laugh, a woman responds: "Tell Johnny, happy birthday."

With that, Zacha turns on the lights. Kenneally shouts, "Happy birthday!" to one of the card players through the car's loudspeaker. When the deputies drive off, everyone smiles.

But the mood changes quickly as they pass a maze of metal fences surrounding a housing project. They both look carefully. "There's a lot of crime here and a lot of dope here," Zacha says.

"Nobody here is going to help the police," Kenneally says.

Built like a linebacker, the 6-foot, 2-inch Zacha can flick off his nice-guy smile and zap on a laser-like stare in a flash. Kenneally, an athletic 6-footer capable of intimidation when the need arises, projects a more genial persona.

Kenneally says the two "work as one. We've both got good gut instincts, knowing if something's wrong in a situation. Nine out of 10 times, we're right."

"We're best friends," Zacha says. "We both know what our next move is going to be. That's important when it comes to officer safety."

Reserves are not assigned to units. Rather, they choose their own station. And Century is not for everyone.

Jurado, the second-in-command at the station, says a reserve deputy must be "somebody who is self-confident, who understands there is a lot of violence in this area."

Jurado says both men are outstanding cops. "To go ahead and accept another profession to the degree they have is phenomenal...The full time guys respect their skills and have confidence in their abilities, which is no easy feat in an area like this."

As the sun sets and night creeps in, they spot an old Monte Carlo on Compton Avenue driving erratically. They stop the car. The teen-age driver has no driver's license or registration. He says the car belongs to a relative.

"If I catch you driving this car later tonight, I'm going to arrest you," Zacha says, pointing him in the direction of home after ensuring the car hasn't been stolen. The deputies say that because the area has so much serious crime they can't afford to spend several hours arresting and booking everyone without a driver's license. Unfortunately, the teen-agers know this, so they save money by not registering their cars.

On 64th Street, they spot a teen-ager urinating outside a boarded-up eyesore with an old couch in front. The deputies call the teen-ager and two of his friends to the car. They wear baggy T-shirts, baggy pants and baseball caps turned backward. The deputies warn them not to create any disturbances. There have been several drive-by shootings on the street lately and the deputies are trying to break up gatherings to avoid the possibility of innocent bystanders getting injured.

"I'm claiming this street tonight," Zacha says. "I'm coming back."

Satisfied that the youths understand them, Kenneally and Zacha drive off.

They pass a junky lot with old, rusted-out cars.

A "Code 3"--high alert--crackles over the radio. The deputies flick on the lights and siren. They speed to the 8800 block of Fir Avenue in the Firestone district to investigate a hit-and-run. Once there, they discover to their horror that this is as bad as it gets.

A young girl, about 5 or 6 years old, lies in the middle of the street, the victim of an accident involving a dark-colored Camaro or Firebird that smacked into her and kept going.

Several Sheriff's Department squad cars are on the scene. As flashes of red and blue lights from the cars illuminate the scene, a resident huddles over the child. He tries to comfort her by staunching the blood from cuts on the child's head.

As Zacha and Kenneally help to disperse the crowd, paramedics arrive. Within seconds, six are attending to the child. In the background, Kenneally and Zacha are comforting the child's grandmother, whose cries of grief pierce the night.

The scene lasts only a few minutes. The paramedics quickly load the child onto a stretcher, wheel her into the ambulance and head for the hospital. When they are finished assisting the other deputies and clearing the scene, Zacha and Kenneally head off. A helicopter hovers overhead, helping in the search for the vehicle.

"I'd love to nail this guy," Kenneally says.

Later that night, the deputies stop for a quick bite at the Boys Burger stand on Compton Avenue. Between bites of a monster-size hamburger, Kenneally explains what brings him to this part of town, at this time of night. "There's a camaraderie here, which is not always the case in Hollywood," Kenneally says.

He adds that there is another difference: "In this business, you can spot the criminals."

Zacha says police work has helped his film work. "My fellow employees admire me for taking the time to do something that most people don't even want to know about. Most people spend their lives staying away from crime-ridden areas."

Though they've seen the worst, that doesn't stop them from seeing the best. "There's a lot of great people here," Zacha says. "Some of the nicest people I've ever met are from the inner city."

Back on patrol, they hand out a ticket to a woman who sped through a red light, break up a potential disturbance back on 64th Street and counsel a group of gang members on going straight.

But nothing happens that is as serious as the hit-and-run. Before checking out around midnight, they learn the young girl had died.

"When I get home," says Kenneally, "I'm going to hug my little girl a little bit tighter."