

# CS officer uses experience in Chicago to run programs

## Robot helps Kapella keep kids in line

By Carol Czyn Reporter

Lt. Bernie Kapella stands 6 feet 4 inches tall. He walks through the halls of the College Station Police Department with a sense of authority, but inside his stern exterior is a warm, caring human being.

"I wanted to be a police officer because I knew if I could change just one kid's life around it would be worth everything to me," Kapella says.

He looks around with worn eyes that probably have seen too much in his years as a cop. His slightly graying hair and well-worn laugh lines reflect the fact that he has tried to be optimistic through it all.

His office is lined with various awards and certificates, and papers and books are stacked high on his desk, revealing the heavy load of a veteran cop at work.

Born in Joliet, Ill., Kapella knows what it's like to live in deprivation. Kapella was raised in an orphanage and says he never knew his father.

"Times were hard back then," he says. "I mean, 50 cents was a lot of money."

"And when you came from an orphanage and were poor, not many places wanted to hire you. So I started getting into trouble. I felt like the whole world was against me because I couldn't get a fair deal anywhere."

Kapella says the turning point in his life came when he met his probation officer.

"He was my inspiration," Kapella says. "He is why I wanted to become a cop. He made me think that I could make a difference."

"You realized, though, after you have been on the force as long as I have and seen the things I have seen, that you can't change the world yourself."

Kapella says he's done what he can to help change things for people. While a Chicago police officer,

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— Lt. Bernie Kapella, College Station police officer

he started a program for a group of nine juvenile delinquents, and only one of them, he says, ever went back to crime.

Kapella's eyes shine and his lips curl into a smile when he talks of the children he has helped.

"One of the girls I had in my group came down here to see me a couple of years ago," he says. "She is glad now that she had someone to help her out when she needed it."

Since he came to College Station nine years ago, Kapella has implemented all of the crime prevention programs for the city, and also was responsible for bringing the second police robot in the nation to College Station. The robot — known as FREDDIE — can perform the work of 30 people and is used to teach school children crime prevention.

"We had a contest and a little boy in College Station came up with that name for us," Kapella said. "That's how we got our Futuristic Robot Equipped with Devices Designed to Inform and Educate."



Photo by Bill Hughes

Lt. Bernie Kapella of the College Station Police Department stands with FREDDIE, a robot that helps teach children about safety.

Children have a limited attention span, he says, and an interesting, shiny robot will make them pay attention.

These are some things that helped Kapella earn the 1985 Officer of the Year Award along with the respect of many officers who work with him.

"I am always trying to think of ways to improve things," he says. "I was reading the newspaper and saw an article about a Florida police station with a robot."

"I thought that would be a great idea for our station, too. It can be used as a teaching tool or to help get someone who wouldn't talk to an officer to talk."

Kapella says he loves children. He has five daughters of his own, two of whom are six-year-old twins, and he says he enjoys carving and painting wooden toys for them.

Kapella says College Station is quite a contrast to Chicago, because crime is a lot worse and more abundant there. He says there are more confrontations that force police officers to use their guns in Chicago.

"It's not like it is on TV, where you see the good guys and the bad guys shooting at each other all the time," he says. "People don't realize that is just fiction."

"I remember once, in Chicago, we got a call that two people were urinating on each other in public, so we went down there and couldn't find anything. On the way back we decided to check out this warehouse that was broken into quite frequently."

"We noticed that a window was broken. So we decided to investigate. My partner went into the building and I tried to wire for backup but it was 20 degrees below zero and the radio was frozen. "So we had to make our own judgement on the situation. The person then ran out of the warehouse and we told him to freeze repeatedly, but he didn't stop."

"He finally stopped, turned around and started reaching into his jacket. We didn't know what he was doing so we fired and hit him."

A look of sadness mixed with regret came over his face as he remembered the incident, and he says he will never forget the feeling he

experienced after shooting someone and doesn't know what he would do if faced with another such situation.

But a police officer must protect himself, he says. It is a horrible experience to have to kill someone, he says, even if he is doing something to harm someone else.

Kapella says such incidents, along with the fact that his girlfriend at the time was from Navasota, helped him make the decision to move south. He moved to Navasota, got married and began working for the College Station Police Department when a juvenile officer position opened.

"I started the crime prevention division and have brought it to what it is today," he says.

What it is today is the six or so people under him doing the work Kapella was once doing by himself.

Kapella implemented all of the juvenile crime prevention programs here, which include safety, shoplifting, drug, forgery, home security, bike safety, rape prevention and something he calls "fish 'n' fun."

"Fish 'n' fun" is a crime prevention program in which children 12 years and under are encouraged to spend time fishing with police offi-

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— Bernie Kapella, lieutenant

cers. The program is aimed at counseling children to prevent them from later breaking the law.

Above Kapella's desk is a framed needlepoint picture of all the programs he started. He made it himself, he says proudly.

Jewell Owens, Kapella's secretary, says, "He's got a right to be proud. Considering where he started and what he has been through, he has made fantastic accomplishments."

"I think he has made a difference in a lot of peoples' lives. He's got a heart as big as the state of Texas."

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