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Boone detective succeeds in high-profile cases

BY MARK HANSEL • MHANSEL@NKY.COM • JULY 1, 2010

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BOONE COUNTY - Tracy Watson has encountered a lot of bad people in her career and helped put many of them behind bars.

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Watson works as a detective in the Boone County Sheriff's Office, specializing in personal crimes and has been involved in investigating some of the region's most high-profile criminals, including David Hopper, the infamous "blue-eyed rapist."

In May 2007, Watson was recognized by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children for her role in bringing to justice a Canadian citizen who was uploading pictures of himself engaging in sex acts with an 18-month-old child.

"That was a really tough one because I had to break the news to her parents," Watson said. "They had no idea."

The parents apparently left the little girl with a relative, who entrusted the child's care to the abuser.

Watson said those types of cases are all too common, especially in the computer age. The access to child pornography and other sexual content online, Watson said, seems to feed the deviant behavior of these criminals.

"It's almost as if, in their mind, the internet validates their behavior," Watson said.

As a result, Watson says there are more criminals, and potential victims, than the two-person unit can keep up with.

"If we had the resources, we could probably get someone every day," Watson said. "When we pose online, within minutes we are deluged with responses."

There is not a history of law enforcement in Watson's family, but she recognized her life's ambition from an early age.

"I just knew, for as long as I can remember, that I was going to be a cop," Watson, who grew up in Mentor, Ohio, said.

She worked in undercover narcotics in Lake County for two years before moving to Boone County when her husband took a job in the area in 1986.



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The Enquirer/Patrick Reddy

Tracy Watson, a detective in the Boone County Sheriff's Department, has been recognized for her work in child abuse crimes by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

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She went to work for the Boone County Police Department, which later merged into the Boone County Sheriff's Department, in 1989.

She started out as a patrol officer and said she enjoyed the "adrenaline rush" that came with working on the road.

During her two pregnancies she got a taste of investigative work, and gained valuable experience. In 1994 she was involved in the investigation of Clay Shrout, a Boone County teenager who killed his parents and two sisters before taking classmates hostage at Ryle High School. Shrout is serving a life sentence for the killings.

Watson was promoted to detective in 1997, and initially came in under a one-year grant program that provided funding specifically for sexual abuse investigations. While she has never left, but she admits that there are times when the work takes a toll.

"A lot of people don't want to work the unit, but personal crimes involve a lot of different things," Watson said. "We will have weeks on end where we work with little children that have been molested and that can get to you, but it needs to be done. It gets the kids out of that bad situation they are in."

Watson credits her colleagues and especially Boone County Sheriff Michael Helmig for the recognition she and the department have received.

"If it wasn't for Sheriff Helmig's willingness to share resources and let us work with other agencies, we wouldn't be nearly as successful," Watson said. "It's always a group effort."

She cites the Hopper case as an example.

The "blue-eyed rapist" was not suspected of crimes in Boone County, but when other agencies asked for assistance, Helmig was eager to volunteer resources.

"For six weeks, the sheriff lent me to a task force," Watson explained. "He said either the guy lives here and is avoiding his home turf or he is about to hit us, because his profile shows he targets areas near an interstate."

Hopper lived in Burlington at the time of his arrest.

Watson is also a trained hostage negotiator and has become involved in helping to educate the next generation of law enforcement professionals. She has spoken to classes at Northern Kentucky University and Beckfield College.

Now 45, and with more than 20 years of service, she is eligible for retirement, but doesn't anticipate leaving the department anytime soon.

"We are doing good work here and we get a lot of support," Watson said. "It's nice to have the option, but I don't really think about leaving."

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