

Crescent City's new police chief shares thoughts on his new job

October 24, 2019



Officer Richard Griffin, 40, was sworn in as the new chief of police during Monday night's Crescent City Council meeting. We sat down with Griffin beforehand and asked him about his rise through the ranks, the top issues facing the city - and just how big a role did Mel Gibson play in influencing Griffin's interest in a law-enforcement career.

QUESTION: You started at the lowest rung on the totem pole at the sheriff's office as a civilian, before working your way up to correctional officer, deputy, task force, detective sergeant, then patrol sergeant.

RICHARD GRIFFIN: If I remember right, I was making right at \$7 an hour, and, yeah, as a civilian clerk at the jail, so you run the paperwork from the courts and you press the button to the doors for the jailers. That was September 2005, when I started.

Q: How did you end up in the Crescent City area?

GRIFFIN: My dorm advisor at Southern Oregon University is Clint Schaad, who is now the elected auditor here (County of Del Norte). Became friends with him. I actually came up and helped with wrestling. Basically, I went up to Alaska to work with his cousin in construction, called me up one day, hey, we have a job opening in the jail if you want it. Get your foot in the door. I interviewed for the process then, that's why I came back over.

Q: Was that what you had in mind when you wanted to pursue law enforcement?

GRIFFIN: No, but I knew when I got into it that was to open doors so I could get into it. I could progress through it, if I played my cards right and kept my nose to the grindstone. So, yeah, my goal was to eventually get on the streets. I knew I wanted to do police work, but that was just learning. I'm very glad I did it that way, because I got exposed to the whole process, the court process, inmate intake, everything, and that gave me a lot better understanding of the people I'd be working with. The two years I spent in the jail, it's learning about the people you'll be out there dealing with anyway.

Q: What was your inspiration in the first place for pursuing law enforcement? Was it the movies or something else?

GRIFFIN: Honestly, growing up it was the action movies, the "Lethal Weapon" stuff. Mel Gibson made it look like an awesome thing to do. You see the movies of cops and the fun stuff they do, the explosions here and there, the shootouts. And, yeah, it's not that at all. My thing is, I wish I'd done better in typing classes back in the day, because it's 90-some-odd percent to do with typing, what we do. That was the reality check for me. You go out and do something fun for five minutes, then you're doing at least a couple hours of paperwork. I had a backup plan if I didn't like police work. Initially, I wanted to go into federal work, so I went to a job fair and talked to an FBI agent, and he said no, don't get a criminology degree. Get something you can fall back on. Plus, if you get into here, you'll be doing a lot of white-collar crime-type stuff, so we want you to have that business degree. That's why I did the marketing degree with the criminology minor. If you look at cop work, you're marketing yourself anyways. The thing I'm marketing is, most likely you're going to jail or some other outcome I want, so you have to apply those principals.

Q: Was your career path a natural progress up the ladder, or something unique to just you?

GRIFFIN: If you're going to progress up, there's been a few to come from the jail, not from correction technician up. At the time I took that job, I also had two other jobs in southern Oregon. So, I was going back and forth to make ends meet. I knew what my goal was. I was motivated for it. I knew it wasn't going to be that long in that situation. I don't know of anyone else that's worked from the bottom up like that, other than making commander or sheriff. I was pretty much the top of the sheriff's office, too.

Q: What do you think are some of the challenges the city faces moving forward?

GRIFFIN: Officer retention and wellness. We have a really good core atmosphere, a good group family, and most of the people here have 15 to 20 years left in their career. As long as we can keep that together, to me, that's my job. We can grow as a department. We're going to have the problems that come up, like the

homeless issue right now. I don't see us training specifically for that or switching things just for that. I'm going to prepare my officers to go out and handle any problems we have. Get the basic training down, get some extra training in, and keep them ready and prepared for whatever comes at us. Because the homeless problem, that's there today, isn't going to be there tomorrow or the next day. It's going to be something different we'll have to adapt to.

Q: What other goals do you have?

GRIFFIN: I do want to bring in more less-lethal products. That would be the first thing on the list. Especially with the laws coming down with the amount of deadly force issues. So, I'm giving my guys and gals more options to use on their belts in the de-confliction process.

Q: How do you look at the challenge of retaining officers and not losing them to work at Pelican Bay State Prison?

GRIFFIN: Biggest thing for us to do specifically, I can't speak for other agencies, keep our family going as far as what we have, is to take care of each other. You get an atmosphere going, it becomes a place where people want to work. I took a pay cut coming over to the city from where I was at, several dollars an hour pay cut. But I did it knowing what I was getting in to, and that in and of itself is worth \$10 an hour. If you're not happy going home at night, you're going to start looking for other places to go. (The prison is) our competition. Our pay scale is up there, as far as Crescent City PD itself. We got a very good contract the last couple times. Other than that, it's the environment we work in and taking care of each other.

Q: What is it about Crescent City that keeps residents here?

GRIFFIN: It's God's country. There's no way around it. It's one of the better places in the world. You look at the water, Smith River, the town of Smith River, see the elk wandering around. Anywhere you go, you're five minutes away from world-class hiking, world-class fishing. I've got friends down in L.A., working in San Francisco, they're driving two to three hours just to get to work. I'm used to taking a four-minute drive to work. The worst-case scenario, getting through traffic takes me five minutes from one end of town to the other. When you have that hometown atmosphere, people know each other, good and bad. Sometimes, it's hard to get an investigation done because everybody knows each other. At the same time, if you can get at one person, they know about everybody. Just all that combined, it's one of the better places to live as long as we can keep moving forward with it.

Q: What did you think of the pool candidates you had to get through?

GRIFFIN: There were 37 total when we started, I was very impressed, we put it out nationwide. At the end of the day, nobody can argue if you made it through that gauntlet of a process, I think you earned it. I went up against a lot of good people. One of them was Ed Wilson, he's one of the sergeants here. For me to get through the first step of the process, let alone to be chosen, I'm very proud, especially with the people I was up against.

Q: What did your family (wife Caitlyn, son Rogue, 4, and daughter Karson, 5) think of your advancement to police chief?

GRIFFIN: They're very excited. They know that dad's the boss now, the chief. They were actually one of the first ones to know, because when I got the call from the city manager, my wife was right there. So, when they found out, they actually had to keep the secret for a few days until it was finalized. They did a very good job; they didn't even tell grandma. It was kind of a cool thing for them. They're all excited for what I do. Rogue knows I go out and look for bad guys and take them to jail. They understand, because there's no hiding them from the truth.

Q: What do you like to do in your free time?

GRIFFIN: Basically, hang out with my family. They're playing soccer now. They were doing karate earlier. I'm teaching my son how to play chess. He's real excited about that and he's already picking up stuff that took me a few years to realize. Just supporting them and helping them grow up to be good people is the main thing. In my spare time, I love power lifting. I've been a competition power lifter for a long time. I still have one world record (International Powerlifting Association World Pro Men's Police Division, Super Heavy Weight, 683.4-pound squat) and held 14 state records at one time up in Oregon. I like going to the gym when I can. That relieves the stress. I want to get back into powerlifting. At some point, I want to start coaching kids. I coached wrestling and football when I first started here. That's a huge thing for me, is getting kids to connect with law enforcement at a younger age. So we're not first dealing with them when we can't correct them, at 16 or 17 years old.