Wilsonville welcomes new police chief with varied experience

Rhodes2.JPG
Wilsonville Police Chief James Rhodes stands outside the police station. Rhodes became the sixth police chief in the city's history when he took over for Nick Watt in June. (Justin Runquist)

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In the past two decades, Wilsonville's new police chief, James Rhodes, has done just about everything in law enforcement.

His career with the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office and the Oregon City Police includes stints as an undercover narcotics officer, a contracted forest ranger, a search and rescue coordinator, a public information officer, and a detective working homicides, robberies and child-abuse cases.

"All of that has played into making me who I am," Rhodes said. "I bring with me that experience of a patrolman, a detective, an investigator, but part of my job is to mentor my sergeants and officers here."

Rhodes, 42, took over for retired chief Nick Watt last month, and is Wilsonville's sixth police chief. The city contracts its police service with the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office. It began the practice in 1979, but the department didn't have its first chief until the early 1990s.

Rhodes – previously a sergeant and now a lieutenant with the Sheriff's Office – oversees a department of about 20 staffers in Wilsonville, which includes four shifts of patrol officers, two sergeants, a community service officer, a detective, a traffic enforcement officer and a school resource officer. So far, the job has gone fairly smoothly and the community has extended him a warm welcome, he said.

"There's a strong relationship between the police department and the citizens," Rhodes said. "It's a fun, very optimistic, very positive environment to be in."

Watt brought a community-oriented policing style to Wilsonville during his six years with the department, Rhodes said. The approach put an emphasis on open communication with the public and accessibility to the police.

Rhodes hopes to maintain that culture while making the department more efficient as his staff and the city continue to grow in the coming years. He embraces the
prospect of working with a small community, but he also realizes his new position comes with some bigger challenges.

"The relationship is stronger," Rhodes said. "The expectations are higher from the community, which makes it a little more demanding. But it's far more rewarding, because you can see the results of talking to people.

Rhodes began his law enforcement career as a reserve officer for the Oregon City Police after graduating from Western Oregon University with a bachelor's degree in law enforcement and criminal justice. But he didn't always plan to get into the field.

He originally attended Oregon State University as a pre-med student hoping to work in emergency medicine. Over a summer, he briefly moved to Oregon City to work and take summer classes at Clackamas Community College, where he took his first law enforcement class and quickly decided to change his career path.

"I loved it so much," Rhodes said. "It was the kind of job that had meaning and made a difference. But the other part of it, honestly, is that it was a job that came with a lot of unknowns."

He joined the Sheriff's Office in 1997. Of all his experiences there, Rhodes said he particularly enjoyed investigating robberies.

"Robbers are some of the worst of the worst," he said. "They create a bunch of fear in the public. They hold up banks. They're the kind of people that I like to hunt."

Since entering the field, Rhodes hasn't always seen himself ending up as a police chief, but he doesn't plan on leaving anytime soon.

"I'm one of the guys who's always looking for a new challenge," he said. "This has been a wonderful opportunity and a great place to land."

-- Justin Runquist

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