On the front line of public information

Sgt. Todd Umstead hones communication skills in Philly during dark days for its force.

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Lancaster city police Sgt. Todd Umstead was driving into Philadelphia one morning last November when he heard the bad news.

The night before, a drunken driver slammed into a Philadelphia police cruiser, killing Sgt. Timothy Simpson.

Umstead, Lancaster’s new public information officer, was heading to the Roundhouse, Philadelphia’s police headquarters, for the second day of a three-day work session with that city’s Public Affairs Office. As PIO, Umstead handles media contact with the police. The Philadelphia session gave him a glimpse of how that city’s public affairs office worked.

Umstead thought about turning around and going home. “I didn’t want to be in their way,” he said. But he stayed.

“I pulled into the Roundhouse and...you could just see the look of devastation on all of their faces.”

Sgt. Todd Umstead is Lancaster’s new public information officer.

One of the first people he saw was Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey.

“His face was just ashen,” Umstead said. Five of his officers had been killed within the last year.

“This is like a nightmare,” Ramsey said.

Umstead then reported to the public affairs office and met with supervisors Lt. Frank Vanore and Sgt. Roy Evers.

“The first thing I said was, ‘I will not be in your way,’” Umstead said. “I’ll sit back and watch.” But they said, “No...We need your help.”

So Umstead lent a hand, later attending the press conference he helped set up.

“There was a lot of anger in the building,” he said. “The guy driving...shouldn’t have been out.”

Newspaper reports say the driver had been arrested two weeks earlier with a shotgun in his car, then released by a Philadelphia bail officer. At the hospital after the crash, police found three bags of heroin on him.

Umstead said that day was invaluable.

“On one hand, it was the worst time to be there. As far as a learning experience...to see all that went into that and how they handled it was...powerful and emotional,” he said.

The officers in charge of the conference were “very professional,” Umstead said.

“They saved their emotions for behind closed doors.

“For me, it was empowering. It made me realize I can do this job.”

With six months under his belt, Umstead remains confident.

He said he took the job because, after 17 years on the street, first as an officer, then a sergeant supervising a shift, Umstead wanted “a change of pace.”

“I always thought I had good personal skills, good communication skills,” he said. “I did have some apprehensions, though.” He laughed, “I don’t normally go around seeking out public-speaking opportunities.”

He began in September and in addition to being the force’s spokesman, Umstead supervises the School Resource Officers and oversees the crime-prevention programs.

Chief Keith Sadler wanted to make sure Umstead had

said Preaches transparency and learned its importance in Philadelphia.

“When I became captain, we had a media-training session,” Sadler said. “They told us, ‘When you folks don’t give us an interview at the scene, we’re going to talk to someone.’”

That “someone” could be, Sadler said, anyone looking for “15 minutes of fame.”

“Even if you don’t know a lot, you should say that...It’s better than having people speculate or spread rumors about what happened.”

Sadler walks the walk. As a deputy chief in Philadelphia, he gave the media his personal cell phone number. He did the same thing when he became chief in Lancaster.

“People thought I was crazy,” he said.

Sadler has stayed close with the department he left, arranging for Umstead to do his “internship” there.

“All these guys in Philly worked for me,” Sadler said. “Vanore, Evers, they were great detectives...[T]hey made the offer and told me whenever I wanted I could send our guy down there.”

So Umstead went. And he returned the following week to attend Simpson’s funeral.

Visibly moved, he recalled the procession that traveled I-95 to the Bensalem cemetery.

“State troopers and Philadelphia police had all the exit ramps shut down.”

And though drivers along the road were being inconvenienced, Umstead said, “People got out of their cars and waved, or held their hand over their heart. Construction workers along the way hung flags from their cranes.

“I still get choked up thinking about it.”

It reminded him of being a rookie and representing the city force at the funeral of a Harrisburg officer shot and killed during an arrest.

“I remember this one couple in front of a modest house, standing there with their hands on their heart for the entire procession,” Umstead said. “I’ll never forget the look on their faces.”

He fingered the badge above his heart and said, “In the 17 years I have pinned this badge on my chest, every day I think of their faces and I am reminded that those are the type of people I do this job for.”