

*"I feel like I am a part of this neighborhood. I can't see myself working anywhere else."* — **Officer T.J. Smith**



**ABOVE:** County police Officer T.J. Smith gets a chuckle out of the actions of two Pioneer City youths who broke out in a rendition of the theme song from the television show "Cops" when they saw his cruiser. **BELOW:** Officer Smith hands out coupons for free Slurpees at 7-Eleven to some area youths after talking with them about a complaint. Officer Smith has been patrolling the community for four years.

# Eyes on the prize

## Officer walks beat of hope in Pioneer City

By **PAUL WILSON**  
Staff Writer

**C**ounty police Officer T.J. Smith keeps an active count of the positive days on his beat working in Severn's Pioneer City neighborhood.

As of Monday, he was up to 33 days and counting with no major arrests in 2004.



In a west county neighborhood well-known for its history of drug activity and other assorted

crime and vice, Officer Smith has learned to look on every positive day as a small miracle.

"I always try to keep a smile on my face around here," said the four-year county police veteran, who has patrolled the



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## From The Front Page

## SMITH

(Continued from Page A1) streets of Pioneer City since graduating from the county Police Academy in 2000. "This neighborhood is getting there. It's headed in the right direction. Slowly but surely, you can see a difference."

The biggest difference so far, Officer Smith said, is that the community — long known for its high crime rate, violence and open-air drug markets — had zero homicides in 2003 and just one in 2002. Those statistics are nothing short of a work of God, Officer Smith said.

"The area hasn't seen a murder since December 2002," Officer Smith said. "I was told horror stories about this place when I was at the academy, but I have been here since day one and this place is country compared to what goes on in Baltimore."

## Getting involved

Officer Smith's impact isn't lost on residents of the community, many of whom see him as friend and not foe.

"T.J. is a breath of fresh air," said Xavier Hawkins, a recovering drug addict who has been clean for more than five years. The father of two now participates in neighborhood watch programs near his Meade Village home.

"He takes the time to get personal," Mr. Hawkins said. "He lets people know that when they get in trouble, it not only affects them, it affects others around them."

The post is one for which Officer Smith volunteered coming out of the academy. It's also one he said he wouldn't trade for the world.

"I feel like I am a part of this neighborhood," Officer Smith said. "I can't see myself working anywhere else."

Officer Smith encounters more than his share of the rough-and-tumble types generally associated with the area. His days, however, also are spent conducting patrols, attending community meetings,



By Andy Carruthers — Maryland Gazette

County police Officer T.J. Smith stops along Arwell Court to talk with Mark Woods, a community landlord who bought numerous properties in the neighborhood last year.

Bible study groups and mentoring sessions and chatting with residents. The latter provides an inside scoop of sorts to what's really happening in the community, Officer Smith said.

"He cares a lot about what goes on in that community and it shows," said Lt. Scott Davis, Officer Smith's supervisor at the Western District, adding the officer's job has been made harder by budget cuts that leave him as the only officer regularly patrolling the area.

Police work isn't just handcuffs and arrests, Officer Smith said. It's gaining trust to change attitudes.

"It's important to have friends around here because you're outnumbered," Officer Smith said. "Working this neighborhood ought to be required for rookie officers. They'd learn what real policing is all about. You are not going to learn anything working in Crofton."

The most troubling part of the job, Officer Smith said, is watching the kids he knows are headed for a fall, but realizing he can do little to stop the cycle.

"I can see it unfolding," Officer Smith said. "The parents are gone or don't care or they have siblings already in the system. The list goes on and on."

While he hopes to have a positive effect on just one person or one street corner one day at a time, Officer Smith leaves

his post every day wishing he could do more.

"The biggest problem in this area is recidivism," said longtime Pioneer City resident Yvonne Galloway, who runs a neighborhood group, Pioneers in Action, that actively works with Officer Smith on various neighborhood issues from loitering to bus service. "The day after they are arrested, they are right back on the streets."

## Personable approach

Everything that goes on in Pioneer City is a type of hustle, Mr. Hawkins said. Officer Smith, he said, is hustling to make a change.

"This is a community for kids," he said. "T.J. gets personal with the people around here. He knows it's not just about locking people up, it's about helping them out, too."

To many in the community, Officer Smith isn't just a cop. He's one of them. Kids pass by and strike up conversations freely. Residents wave from their front doors and say hello as he passes on the street.

"The biggest thing with T.J. is that he cares and it shows," says Maurice Price, who works at the community center in Meade Village.

"He's working to make sure the community is no longer user friendly," he said, referring to the outsiders who come in and try to desecrate the community with drugs and

guns and crime. "He's working to fight the negativity that pervades this place."

In his patrol car, Officer Smith keeps a 3-inch thick file of mug shots and photos so he can recognize potential troublemakers.

## Image makeover

A sad part about his job he said, is knowing that only about 10 percent of the people in the area cause the vast majority of the problems.

It's made worse, Officer Smith said, by the revolving door between the streets and the court system.

"You see the same people arrested over and over and over," he said, his face offering up a clear measure of disgust. "I shouldn't know some of these kids' first names, but I see them so much, I know their parents' names, their birthdays..."

A stronger neighborhood watch program would help tremendously, Officer Smith said. But stiffer jail sentences would be an even bigger boost.

"The courts are a joke to these people," he said, citing loitering and drug possession and distribution as common offenses that need harsher sentences. "The system is laughed at around here because most of these guys know they will never serve a day in jail."

While much has been done, Officer Smith still has plenty of goals. A voter registration drive and construction of a community center are two near the top of his list. His ideas also include a letter-writing campaign to county judges to have them visit the area and see the effect, or lack thereof, their sentences have in making the area more secure.

Most of all, though, Officer Smith is fighting to change the image of Pioneer City.

"As long as the perception of this place stays the way it has been, nothing will change," Officer Smith said. "Everyone who applies for this job says they want to help people. This is the best place to do it."