

WPD's history-making rookie



Rookie cop Lourdes Lopez gets nicked by an ejected shell cartridge during practice with a 9mm weapon at the police firing range. Training officer is Bob Leonardich.

Michael McCollum

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WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
March 21, 1995

REFERENCE

Lourdes Lopez department's first Latina

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WATSONVILLE — Lourdes Lopez is making history.

Lopez, 21, yesterday became the first Latina and only the third female to join the Watsonville Police Department.

Lopez, a 1991 Watsonville High graduate, understands she is treading a new path for Latinas, and hopes her presence on the police force serves as an inspiration.

"I want to get them to think, 'If she can do it, why can't I?'" Lopez said.

Born and raised in Watsonville, Lopez, who is bilingual, got involved with the Watsonville police cadets when she was about 16 years-old. After Police Chief Terry Medina and Capt. Chuck Carter visited Watsonville High to talk about a career in law enforcement, Lopez and one of her friends decided to "shadow" Medina and Carter on the job. Then they went on a ride-along with a police officer. After that, Lopez decided to join the police cadets.

Three years ago, her family moved to Salinas, where she attended Hartnell College, and last December, she graduated from the police academy at Gavilan College in Gilroy. She was the only Latina in the police academy.

If Lopez's career choice had been left up to her mother, she

would have chosen a more "traditional" career for her daughter.

"I don't think this is what (my mother) had in mind when I was a baby," said Lopez, with a wide grin. Her whole family, including her two younger siblings — a brother and sister — have been very supportive of her decision to join the police department, she said.

It didn't take long after joining the cadets that she realized police work was going to be something she was going to enjoy.

"I said, 'Wow! This is something that is fun and exciting,'" she said.

She realizes times will come in which the stark reality of police work will crash in. One possible incident she said might prove to be difficult is if she ever has to confront one of her friends. Since she was born and raised in Watsonville, she knows a lot of people and said it is almost inevitable the situation will present itself.

"It's going to be very hard," Lopez said, "but my job is going to be first."

Her work as a cadet helped prepare her for the job as a

police officer, she said.

"It's was a lot of work, a lot of work," she said. "And a lot of discipline." At every level, whether it was communicating with the public or the appearance of their uniforms, cadets had to meet the highest professional standards, Lopez said.

"They didn't tolerate any nonsense," Lopez said.

There are lots of cop shows on TV, but Lopez said she never saw a female cop role on any of these shows that offered her a role model she could strive for. Luckily, she didn't have to look to Hollywood for a role model.

Instead, she found one in Sgt. Kim Austin, the only other active policewoman on the force. The third policewoman left the force several years ago.

Austin, who has been with the police department since 1983, proved to be a value source of inspiration, Lopez said. She admires how Austin deals with the public in a professional manner but can also mix in a personal touch that makes communication much easier, even under adverse conditions.

Lopez said once she settles into her job, she hopes to do "a lot of community service work." She plans to speak at schools and do community outreach for the police department.