Washington County DUII enforcement deputy Jason McLaughlin patrols the streets with passion

By Rebecca Woolington, The Oregonian

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Jason McLaughlin scopes out bar scenes across Washington County every Wednesday through Saturday. He heads out shortly after 9 p.m. and goes home after dawn.

McLaughlin posts himself outside, in parking lots. He keeps his distance, but he’s no wallflower. Anyone paying attention could spot him.

Slick top, unmarked police cars -- equipped with a large spotlight on the driver's side -- aren't that discreet. So most people can recognize McLaughlin’s navy blue Crown Victoria as the law. He's OK with that.

Incognito or conspicuous, McLaughlin can do his job: Keep drunks off the roads.

Since 2008, McLaughlin has worked the graveyard shift as a DUII enforcement deputy for the Washington County Sheriff's Office Traffic Team. The sheriff's office last week wrapped up a grant-funded DUII enforcement effort, part of the nationwide "Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over" campaign. During the three-week crackdown, deputies arrested 63 impaired drivers.

McLaughlin, who lives in Washington County, has arrested in recent years about 200 people for DUII a year. In the seven years the 35-year-old has worked for the sheriff's office -- both on patrol and in DUII enforcement -- he says he's arrested more than 800 impaired drivers. The state's Multi-disciplinary DUII Training Task Force named McLaughlin its 2008 DUII Enforcement Officer of the Year.

He has both the eye and the passion for the job. It's a big one, but one he believes makes a difference.

He reads the research and knows the numbers. He rattles off the highest blood-alcohol level (.36 percent) he's ever seen a driver blow. He learns the histories and locations of the county's bars. And he notes the when and the where of dollar-beer nights countywide.

"My heart's in it," he says during a recent shift. "My goal is to prevent terrible crashes from happening -- fatal crashes -- while I am on duty."
If there's a deadly crash, McLaughlin wonders whether he should have parked outside a different bar, patrolled a different road. But he knows he can't be everywhere, so he mostly cruises through Aloha and the Rock Creek area.

He looks for speeding. Failing to stay in a lane. Traveling at erratic speeds. "Rocking the boat" -- repeatedly swaying from one side of a lane to another.

He looks for people who hit curbs, stumble before getting into their cars, forget to turn on their headlights. It's the people who demonstrate a pattern of bad driving, he says, who get pulled over.

Clues of impairment can be subtle, he says, so cops need to be alert. "I'm a strong believer of 'if you're not looking for a drunk, you're not going to find one,'" he says.

Before lighting a driver up -- cop talk for flipping on the red and blues to pull a driver over-- McLaughlin keeps his distance. Many impaired drivers, he says, slam on their brakes when they see police behind them. But predicting an intoxicated driver's reaction, he says, is always a guessing game, and a cop must proceed with caution.

Early one recent Thursday, McLaughlin spotted a silver sedan leaving a Hillsboro bar off Southwest 185th Avenue. His patrol car engine surged as he attempted to catch up to the vehicle. The driver sped down the road, traveling 56 miles per hour in a 40 mile-an-hour zone, McLaughlin says.

The car drifted over the center line, and that was it. "I'm pulling them over," McLaughlin declared. On went the lights.

The driver failed the field sobriety test, which included having drivers follow a light with their eyes, walk nine steps heal to toe and steadily hold one leg out in front of them. On went the handcuffs.

The driver, McLaughlin says, had a blood-alcohol level of .11 percent during a breath test at the Washington County Jail.

When he makes an arrest, McLaughlin is blunt despite a driver's excuse. "I'm not going to sugarcoat it and say it's OK," he says. "If it was OK, they wouldn't be sitting in the back of my patrol car."

McLaughlin, who hasn't had a drink in 11 years, says alcoholism in his family motivated him to be a DUII deputy. The memory of his brother's best friend dying in an alcohol-related crash while in high school also fueled his desire.

Last year, about 10,000 people died in DUII-related crashes nationwide, McLaughlin says. "That's 10,000 lives that could have been saved, if someone would have called a cab."

He knows DUII is a crime that can touch any demographic -- rich, poor, and everyone in between. Enforcing such a prevalent crime that can turn deadly, he says, makes for rewarding work.

But with a wife, an 11-year-old son and a 7-year-old daughter, McLaughlin isn't sure whether he can sustain the graveyard shift his entire career. He has football games and dance recitals to attend.
So, in the meantime, while he continues to spend nights scouring bar parking lots, he likes to think he's keeping the roads safer for the public and his loved ones, protecting the county and his home.

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