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Recommended Citation

Originally published on the [one twenty seven blog](#) on April, 01, 2024.

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Officer Joe

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April 1, 2024



By Ryan Darragh

Joseph Hegenderfer, “Officer Joe” to us Denisonians, is one of Denison’s most beloved staff members. As a soon-to-be graduate, I can confidently say that he has shaped my Denison experience for the better. Officer Joe has touched the hearts of countless students on this campus. Midday he is found driving loops around in his SUV and often slows when he recognizes a student’s car, or waves at a stop sign to those passing by. He has a warmth and familiarity that makes him uniquely successful at his job. On the weekends Officer Joe can often be found behind a grill at Lamson Lodge cooking hundreds of hot dogs for a greek fundraiser, giving a safe ride to a student on crutches, or at the door of a Sunnies party with a smile and a message to turn the music down. The understanding and kindness that he shows in every interaction with a student has led to immense admiration from the student body.

I sat down with Officer Joe in his office on the first floor of Slayter Union parking garage, to hear more about his experience. He greeted me with his familiar smile lines, gray mustache, and black uniform while asking me about my roommate's game last week and joking about my parking job this morning. Before I could ask my first question, he interrupted "You have to tell me more about yourself first." I chuckled as this speaks exactly to the essence of who Officer Joe is. He takes the time and the care to stop what he is doing and ask us students how we are doing, listening with an open ear.

Before Joe came to Denison he was a firefighter and paramedic for thirty-three years in both Colorado and Ohio, where he served as a fire chief. He retired from his role as a firefighter in 2018 and came to Denison a few months later to serve as a campus safety officer. He spoke of his first year here, "I got to know several of the students. Mainly seniors, I have a soft spot for seniors." I smiled thinking of all the seniors I know, who have a mutual soft spot for him. Joe continued speaking of seniors he met that first year that we both knew, "We would have breakfast once a month or so. So I got to know a lot of them, but they're in Denver now." We exchanged mutual admiration for past students, and it touched me how he knew where they were living post-grad and what they are doing now.

I asked Joe his favorite part of his job and he spoke of his interactions with students, "So, yeah just meeting students. I've always enjoyed that and hearing their stories." *Hearing their stories* struck me. Officer Joe's desire to get to know students and truly help and listen to them speaks to both the success of his role and his admirable character. Joe says that taking the time to get to know the students should be in the job description, "I think when you get to know them, it makes it easier when you do shut down a party or when you have to call in somebody because they made a mistake," he paused and interlaced his fingers over his knee, "I made a lot of mistakes at that age so that I can come alongside people I think." He sighed and looked between me and his hands, with a gloss over his eyes.

"He just gets us, he cares, and he takes the time to show us that," Denison senior, Kate Hinshaw, remarked when reflecting on Officer Joe's impact on her Denison experience.

Many students got to know Joe when he worked nights at Denison. That is often when he would appear at the door to a senior apartment party, or give students rides home when walking home alone. When asked about his experience working nights he chuckled, "Well I like the nights, my wife hates them." Officer Joe usually wouldn't return home from his shift until around 3 a.m. when his wife would be waiting for him. Officer Joe said, "Usually if we'd shut down a party I'd stay and talk to people."

Officer Joe is one of the kindest staff members we have had the pleasure of knowing. He knows where students are from, how their last athletic game or Eisner performance went, and smiles fondly when they pass him walking to class. Every Thursday at 8:30 pm as a class, the seniors have a trivia night in Silverstein Market. This fall, Officer Joe would often make an

appearance standing in the back with crossed arms leaning against the door, keeping to himself. He was always eagerly waved over by teams who wanted his input and met him with an enthusiastic “Officer Joe!” from across the room.

When Officer Joe is off duty, he proudly takes on the role of “Grandpa” to a two and four-year-old. This fall at trivia he told my team of his trick-or-treating plans this year and his firefighter *Paw Patrol* costume. “Monday and Tuesday I’m off here so usually Monday and Tuesday is grandkid day,” he said with a smile.

I ended our conversation by asking why Officer Joe is so passionate about his role as a Campus Safety officer, “I don’t know, a lot of people have helped me so…” his smile lines wrinkled. So, from the students and the senior class especially: Thank you, Officer Joe, for the little and big moments that have had an undeniable impact on our Denison experience. Your kindness is constantly noticed and admired. From handing us a warm hot dog on a cold fall Saturday afternoon, checking on us after a busy finals week, or giving us a “safe-ride” when needed, thank you for it all.

Ryan Darragh is a senior who is preparing to graduate in a few weeks and reflecting on the people like Officer Joe who left a mark on her Denison years and her heart thereafter.