

Introduction

Julia Jarema: Hi, welcome to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. There are great people, programs and resources within this department. In each episode of the Safety Scoop, we'll share how NCDPS employees prevent, protect and prepare North Carolinians and help enhance safety in our state. We hope you'll listen along and learn something you may not have known about the largest state agency in North Carolina.

[Music]

Julia: Hi, I'm Julia.

Kirsten Barber: And I'm Kirsten!

Julia: And you're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

Kirsten: NCDPS is the largest department in the North Carolina state government with some amazing programs and resources...

Julia: ...as well as phenomenal personnel and volunteers.

Kirsten: Listen along as we take you behind the scenes and dive into how the people, programs and resources within this department enhance the safety of the people of North Carolina—give you the scoop, if you will, of all things NCDPS.

Julia: NCDPS's mission is to safeguard the people of North Carolina through prevention, protection and preparation. As you listen to this podcast, we hope you'll learn something you may not have known about the ways the people of NCDPS are working to keep our state safe.

[Music]

Season 1 Episode 8

Julia: March is Women's History Month, so today on the Safety Scoop, we're talking with the first female to achieve the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the North Carolina State Highway Patrol. You might say it was a bit of foreshadowing because Lieutenant Colonel Donna Carter actually began her service as a State Trooper 22 years ago this month. After completing the 98th Patrol Basic School in 1998, Donna began her tenure with the Patrol in Winston-Salem. The Sanford, North Carolina native has since served in supervisory positions across

the state, including stints working in motor carrier enforcement, internal affairs and support services in those particular areas of the Patrol. Welcome, Lieutenant Colonel Carter.

Lt. Col. Donna Carter: Hi, how are you doing?

Julia: Great, thank you for joining us.

Lt. Col. Carter: Yes, ma'am.

Kirsten: Do you want to start off by giving our listeners an overview of your role on the Patrol?

Lt. Col. Carter: Sure. So, I oversee the support operation side of the house which means the Training Academy, so all training that cadets and in-service training that our sworn members take, you know, do annually falls under that shop. I'm also over the budget piece for the agency, and as you can tell, we have a, uh, pretty large budget that we manage. I have a team. We work together and—and accomplish the day-to-day, um, funding requirements for the agency, and then I'm also over what we call the communication logistics section which incorporates fleet, any uniform requirements that we have, as well as the technology side of the house. So, with the in-car technology, such as the computers, radios, things of that nature. So, those things fall under my purview, um, currently. And of course, I have a great team. I don't do any of that by myself. So, I have a great team that help—they help me and the agency move forward.

Julia: That's a lot of stuff.

Kirsten: According to a 2019 report published by the National Institute of Justice, women constitute around 13% of total officers across the nation, and that's data taken from approximately 18,000 unique police agencies in the United States. What inspired you to pursue a career in law enforcement and specifically become a State Trooper?

Lt. Col. Carter: Life is a journey, right? And so, I think one of those things... You start out in college, and you don't really know what you want to do, so as you progress through your coursework and things of that nature, you kind of figure out what you—what you like, and you gravitate towards those things. For me, I gravitated towards education and, um, the physical fitness aspect of that, and I studied in college physical fitness as well as sports medicine. So, part of that was with an education degree. And so, I came—I became a physical education teacher, and as I grew professionally in education, I realized that there was something more that I felt I needed to do. You know, periodically, I would go to the fair and see, you know, see the, um, the troopers around the fairgrounds and directing traffic, and I thought, that is just the most amazing, professional thing that I have ever seen. And you know, never being a part of the military, I really was drawn to that, like I said, that professionalism, that military—that paramilitary

structure and how they operated, but yet, how effective and efficient they were at, you know, helping folks.

So, for me it was just a natural transition from education over to the law enforcement side. I see it all as a, you know, all those folks who do those careers or have hearts of servants, and it just really drew, um, me in, I think, from the— from the aspect of a challenge. Could I actually achieve being even selected as a recruit, you know, as a cadet? And then if that was the case, then could I actually achieve, you know, making it through the school? 'Cause, you know, school is a strenuous, uh, undertaking because it's not only due to the duration but just from all the different things that you learn. And I was just really ready to learn something different and do something different with my life. I looked at it as an opportunity, you know, that I could work anywhere from the mountains to the coast.

And with being a educator, and it's good for some folks, but I just did not want to be hammered down to just the one location. I love the children. I love teaching. But I just didn't see myself being stuck to one spot, so to speak. So, I saw it as an opportunity that I could go anywhere in the state and work and— and explore the great people and the opportunities that this state has to offer and all these little different nooks and crannies from the mountains to the coast. I just thought it was a great opportunity to, um, to challenge myself and to see where this could go. And when you see those men and women out there, there is something to say that, yeah, they're the best of the best, but when you've actually been through, you know the recruiting process and the Basic School process and the training, and then to be stationed throughout the state and throughout different sections, it's just provided me an opportunity to really, number one, appreciate North Carolina and the differe people throughout the state, and number two, how well-adapted we are as an agency to be able to integrate into these communities and help keep these communities safe.

Julia: That's great, thank you. You mentioned the Patrol Basic School, and I know that that is a tough class. That's a tough course to get through, and—and not everybody makes it. Tell us a little bit about your Patrol School experience. How many females were in your Patrol Basic School, or can you tell us what you've seen...

Lt. Col. Carter: Yeah, sure.

Julia: ...over the years?

Lt. Col. Carter: Um, starting from my Basic School, we had five women that started the Basic School. Three of us graduated, but it was a challenge. It wasn't nothing that, um, it's nothing nobody can't do without setting their mind to it. Does it present some challenges? Absolutely. You know, do you have to live away from your family and your home Sunday night through Friday? Absolutely. But at the end of the day, um, you set that goal, you set that vision and you set that in motion, and if you worked hard and you work together, you realize that goal as a team,

right, as a unit. And that's one of the first things that we teach in Basic School is that you don't get anywhere in this life alone, right?

So, the first thing you got to do as a—as a Basic School class, no matter whether you're the 151st which we just started on Sunday or the 98th Basic School, we all have to come together and work together as a unit, as a cohesive unit, and that's true whether it's in Basic School, as well as today as an agency. We have to work together, um, utilizing that paramilitary structure, but at the end of the day we don't get anywhere alone. So, um, Basic School was quite a challenge. It really presents a challenge for folks that are married and have children, and we understand that, but you know, our saying is this: There's not just one State Trooper in any household. Because everybody in that household that supports you and your role as a State Trooper, they're State Troopers as well because we don't get anywhere by ourself.

Julia: Thank you for sharing that.

Kirsten: Uh-huh, yeah, that's awesome. I found it interesting that you mentioned earlier that you started as a cadet, and correct me if I'm wrong, with no criminal justice experience at all.

Lt. Col. Carter: Yeah, that's true. You know, I think that's the beautiful thing about being a State Trooper...

Kirsten: Mmm-hmm.

Lt. Col. Carter: ...is that you can bring all your strengths and—and—and life experiences to this agency, and it doesn't necessarily have to be rooted in the, um, you know, being—already being BLET certified. You know, the thing I took solace in is I knew when I came into this that I was going to be taught everything I needed to know to be effective at my job. And it took the 27 weeks to do it, but you know, and it ranges everywhere from how to conduct a traffic stop to how to utilize your firearm to how to talk to folks, how to investigate collisions. But it's just part of that evolutionary process of—of transitioning from, you know, somebody who doesn't know anything about law enforcement to now, to where you can come out and function at a, uh, beginning level trooper, and that's, um, and that's something to be said.

So, we have people from all various backgrounds, all various educational levels, from all parts of the state, and I think when you bring all that together and you—you grow together as a core group in your Basic School, I think that just brings out the best of everybody. And I think that's one of the things that makes us the best agency in law enforcement in this nation when it comes to a State Highway Patrol because of that—that synergy, right, and that uniqueness that we all incorporate and that we bring with us.

Kirsten: Great, thank you. So, law enforcement has historically been a male-dominated field, along with the technology and medical industry, as well as, like you said,

the military. Can you tell us about your experience as a woman working in this career field?

Lt. Col. Carter:

I think, um, you know, everything has its challenges, right? And that's the beautiful thing about, for us, how we're established. With that Basic School, when you graduate, everything that you put on—your badge, your campaign hat, with that hat badge, this uniform or that patch—you know, everybody had to earn a right to wear that uniform. And I think that's a big difference, that we just don't swear an oath on day one and hand out uniforms. That's not the way it goes. So, part of the—part of our agency and part of our organizational culture is we know as an agency that everybody goes through that same evolutionary process of earning the right to wear the uniform, and so once you, uh, once you hit your new duty stations, then you show up have earned that right to pin that badge on and to wear that campaign hat, and people—and w—we—we respect that because we know how difficult that is to make it through that challenging time in your life.

You know, everything has its ups and down, and everything has, um, you know, challenges. That's part of growth, right, because if you just come in and everything is easy, well, then you don't grow from that. So, there's been some times that I've had some challenges that I had to overcome, but it wasn't without, like I said, the lack of the support that I had with my shift mates, my shift partners, um, my supervisors. Um, they've always supported me. And that goes to, you know, mentoring and coaching folks, right? And thankfully, I had a little bit of that coaching background, so that coaching piece came naturally, and I could recognize a good coach, and I've—and I've tried to be a good coach to other folks. That's part of it, right? It's just learning and growing and just evolving through some of that.

Julia:

Sounds like that—that education background definitely came in handy in several ways.

Lt. Col. Carter:

It does. It has. Education, to me, it has a, um, it's so dynamic as to what directions you could go with that. And you know, just from the organizational point—standpoint, just organizing your work, organizing maybe talking points, you know, and it—it all correlates with lesson plans, how to deal with people, you know, dealing with children and parents and whatnot. You know, some days are easier than others.

Julia:

Right.

Lt. Col. Carter:

But the same way with—with the, um, you know, when you're doing a traffic stop. But the main thing is I think you have to remember is that you never know where somebody is, right, and what they're going through in their life personally, and that each and every day *you* can make a des—you can make an impact on somebody's life. And so, how is that gonna be? Are you going to make a positive impact, or are you gonna allow that to have more of a negative connotation to it?

Kirsten: So, you've spoken on some of the challenges you faced throughout your time with the Patrol, the camaraderie. Is there a specific person or specific instance in your career that has helped you to thrive in this field?

Lt. Col. Carter: You know, I think God puts people in your life at the right time, right? And so, you know, when I showed up at my first new duty station, there were lots of people that rallied around me and—and helped me through, you know, just learning the job, coming from such a different background, not having that experience. But yeah, I just, you know, just my shift partners. There were some older gentlemen there in the district that would sit down and take the time to explain like, hey, I had *this*, and as a young trooper, you want to talk about everything, right? Like...

[Laughter]

...every contact you have with somebody.

Julia: Right.

Lt. Col. Carter: You want to talk it through, an—and I really needed that because it... And they took the time and the patience to do that with me and to help me understand that there was some things that I could really do well and did well intuitively, right? And then there's some other things that, well, you should have done. You—you—you need to make sure you consider this next time. But I, you know, I just had a lot of folks there locally that just rallied around me and helped provide that—that guidance and leadership. Of course, you know, the ones that you don't want to listen to and that's—that's—that's easy enough to kind of figure out.

Julia: Right.

Lt. Col. Carter: But, um, but then, you know, I had an opportunity to come and teach a Basic School, and I tell you, that was probably one of the most life-changing events just from the—the standpoint of having an opportunity to impact those cadets and how to train them, and my goal when I went to the Basic School was to train them better than I was trained. And so, um, and there was—I had an opportunity to implement some things a little differently and to feel like they have an opportunity to go out knowing a little bit more than I did. You know, I was trained pretty good.

Julia: Uh-huh.

Lt. Col. Carter: But I wanted to leave—I wanted to make it a little better, right? I think that's everybody's goal is wherever you are, you leave it better than you found it. But having that opportunity to train those cadets in a Basic School and working them as a Basic School staff with some—some of my fellow co-workers, it was just amazing the growth that occurred for me, personally, as well as

professionally, because, um, you know, I got to see these young men and women start from day one and graduate, but yet I got to develop relationships that have lasted for the—for 22+ years now from those early days of working at Basic School. And I'm often asked what do I find as far as, like, when I—those folks that I train, now that I see them progressing and doing well in the agency and—and being the future leaders of the agency, how does that make me feel? And I was like, I am over the moon excited when I see somebody that I had opportunity to train, and for them to do well within the agency and be those future leaders in the agency, it just makes me so proud. It fills my heart with so much pride to know that I had that impact on someone who did not know a thing about law enforcement the day they set foot on the Training Academy on Garner Road.

Julia: Well, and it sounds like it was a wonderful opportunity for you to combine your two passions and your two callings at one time. And how many teachers ever get to see you did the results of—of their teaching, and in this unique capacity...

Lt. Col Carter: Yeah.

Julia: ...you've been able to do that.

Lt. Col. Carter: Yes.

Julia: What a wonderful gift and a wonderful service.

Lt. Col. Carter: It was.

Julia: Well, as a side note, it's also especially fitting that March is Women's History Month *because* it was 40 years ago this month that the first female trooper, Brenda Oxendine, was sworn into the North Carolina State Highway Patrol. So, with that in mind, kind of tell us—and you've been around, you mentioned, for more than 20 years—how has the Patrol evolved during your tenure?

Lt. Col. Carter: I think we've gotten better. I think we've gotten smarter. Um, I say that, but with the technology that we've been able to, um, employ, to develop and to provide to our members, which I think has helped make us more safety-conscious, right? You know, we got some wonderful folks, some super smart folks, I'm telling you. One of our troopers developed Surviving the First Three Seconds. Well, you know what, he is amazing, and he travels the country training other law enforcement officers to survive in those first three seconds. But if he hadn't had the, um, I think, the environment that the agency provided to create this, um, great program, then we would've never, you know, we would've never realized that. And so, you know, I've seen us grow from allowing our members to grow, if that makes sense, right?

Kirsten: Mmm-hmmm. Yeah, it does.

Lt. Col. Carter: But, um, but I've also seen it from, you know, the technology piece. But just, I think, as an agency, we've gotten better. Who would've thought 40 years ago about a pregnancy policy?

Julia: Right.

[Laughs]

Lt. Col. Carter: And who would have thought 40 years ago with paid parental leave and those types of things? So, not only has, I don't think, has the agency gotten better, I think state government's gotten better. We realize that we have a, um, you—we have a job to do. We have a mission to do. We swear an oath to do it, and—but at the same time, I think we're a lot more cognizant of family and the demands of being, you know, to be a mom or a dad. We understand that, right? And so, to have healthy and happy employees is, uh, is where it's at. And—and without these folks and without these men and women willing to answer the call at all hours of the night, then we can't meet our public [unintelligible] mission. So, it's definitely evolved over the years. You know, when I came on, we were writing paper citations, and now, you know, basically everything's going paperless, right?

Julia: Right.

Lt. Col. Carter: Just in a matter of 20 years. I can only imagine what the next 20 years is gonna hold.

Julia: Well, that brings up my next point. So, what changes do you foresee that lie ahead?

Lt. Col. Carter: Um, I definitely see more technology in our future. You know, everything is going digital and paperless and all that stuff, but you know, one of our challenges is funding because currently, right now, we're seeking funding for a new computer-aided dispatch system. Well, one of those things, the purpose for that is obviously for officer safety and also to bring our—our technologies up to 21st-century technology. We're operating on 20th-century technology right now.

Julia: Right.

Lt. Col. Carter: And it...the longer we kick the can down the road, the long—more it's going to cost in the end because technology's not getting cheaper. And so, you know, we're just looking at some opportunities like that to grow. We really try to identify best practices, you know, whether we go to different conferences or collaborate with, um, you know, the sheriffs or large municipalities in the state, to identify those best practices to see if that's something we can implement, as well. Um, we've adopted the Vision Zero. So, that's to realize, you know, zero fatalities on the road, and we're using data analytics. And back in the day, we used to use pushpin maps. Now we use *data*, and we analyze *data*, whether it's

from a traffic stop or a, um, crash or where a vehicle inspection was done on the motor carrier side. So, we—we mana—we monitor all that see, okay, well, where can we best deploy, you know, our resources to have the greatest impact in saving lives, and that is, ultimately, that—at the end of the day, we're trying to make everyone's commute to and from work the safest commute possible.

Kirsten: North Carolina has more state-maintained roads than any state in the country except for Texas. With such a tremendous territory to cover, tell us how your troopers help keep our roads safe.

Lt. Col. Carter: Part of the things that we do is, I think I mentioned earlier about it, we adopted, uh, Vision Zero and are utilizing the data analytics to best deploy our resources and identify where those crashes are occurring and what times of the day and what days of the week they're occurring. So, when we can identify those, um, areas, then we can deploy those resources to help reduce crashes or fatalities and—and things of that nature.

Kirsten: Awesome. And our listeners are likely familiar with troopers enforcing speed limits and highway safety laws but tell us about other areas which the Highway Patrol is protecting North Carolinians. I know there's many different aspects of the motor carrier enforcement, security, HART teams. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Lt. Col. Carter: Absolutely. Well, the motor carrier is a huge component of what we do in keeping North Carolinians safe. Just last year alone, we conducted over 100,000 safety inspections of various commercial motor vehicles throughout the state, and, um, that really made a huge difference. It drove down our CMV collisions, I think approximately 30%, and so, um, that's just, uh, one opportunity we realize that we see an impact in saving lives. You know, we also do, um, school safety checks. So, I think we did...

Kirsten: Oh, wow!

Lt. Col. Carter: ...close to approximately 20,000 school safety checks last year.

Kirsten: Wow!

Lt. Col. Carter: If not, just under 20,000. But that's a big deal, especially in these communities, for the troopers to swing by those schools and go in and speak to the principals or, you know, just some of the staff or whatnot. Uh, that's just really a—a good partnership there in the community with—between us and—and the school systems. We have a aviation team that they fly all types of missions whether it's, uh, searching for a missing person or helping out a, uh, a local department with whatever event they got going on. We also fly, um, the HART Rescue Missions where somebody gets stranded, say, on the Haw River or whatever.

Kirsten: Mmm-hmm.

Lt. Col. Carter: They can call in and we can, uh, our aviation guys are trained to conduct those types of missions and save those folks and, uh, you know, we just do lots of different things. Security, obviously, at the football, you know, games and the state fair and working those traffic details and make sure folks can get in and out of those events safely. You know, it's just not giving out speeding tickets. It's a lot more to it than that. It's a lot more community-based, as well. You know, at the end of the day, the impact we're trying to do is we're trying to change behaviors, and we're trying to encourage people to follow the laws. 'Cause we don't necessarily enjoy, you know, writing a whole lot of tickets, but at the same time, we understand that we're trying to affect the behavior change into—to allow people to voluntarily, um, comply, and that's what we like to see is that voluntary compliance.

Kirsten: Definitely. And with 1,600 troopers across the state, you guys definitely do have a presence, and it's really cool to see those pictures coming in of troopers in classrooms and then at different events or even meeting community members at a restaurant when they're out in uniform.

Lt. Col. Carter: Mmm-hmm.

Kirsten: That's really cool to see.

Lt. Col. Carter: Yes.

Kirsten: So, out of the members, what percent of troopers currently are female?

Lt. Col. Carter: Well, right now, I think we're around 1%.

Kirsten: Okay.

Lt. Col. Carter: ...of the—of the um, of the agency is—is women, and that equates to approximately 47 women on the patrol.

Kirsten: Okay, and that's not including civilian members?

Lt. Col. Carter: No, that's just sworn.

Kirsten: Okay.

Lt. Col. Carter: Yes, ma'am.

Kirsten: Are you guys currently recruiting?

Lt. Col. Carter: Yes, we are. We're recruiting for the 152nd and the 153rd. The 152nd starts in August, and that's gonna be a fast-track, so anybody with, uh, BLET certification, they're already certified, um, they're welcome to join. Put a application in to start the application process for that school. And then the 153rd will start in December, and that is for a long school. So, that is for anybody that's not BLET

certified. That's for anybody who has a desire and, uh, is willing to come and accept the challenge, eh, to serve the citizens of North Carolina, then that's the school.

Kirsten: Thank you for coming and just to discuss the State Highway Patrol aspect of women in law enforcement for Women's History Month.

Lt. Col. Carter: Thank you so much.

Conclusion

[Music]

Kirsten: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Safety Scoop. To learn more about NCDPS, go to ncdps.gov. Tune in next time on your favorite podcast app to hear more behind-the-scenes stories from the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

[Music]