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35 years helping the force

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By **Seth Kabala**, seth@sethkabala.com

To stay at the same kind of work for 35 years means you either hate yourself or really love what you're doing.

For recently retired Silvis police 911 dispatch supervisor Jeanine Clapp, 55, each year brought her in harmony with the latter, as she has worked with everything from rotary phones to cutting-edge, touch-screen technology. Regardless of the tools at hand, though, it's all been in the service of people in need.

She studied criminal justice at Black Hawk College after high-school, and had designs on becoming a police officer, but changed after she saw a job ad in Silvis for a dispatcher and learned she preferred the command post to being on-the-scene.

As dispatch supervisor, she was responsible for scheduling, processing all the arrest documents for court, reviewing calls, administering the department's records management system, collecting fines, processing subpoena requests for DUI cases, burning audio to disk or flash drive from radio traffic, handling radio and telephone equipment repairs, freedom of information act requests, crash reports for insurance companies.

"Basically, if they need something, they come to me. I mean they do," she said

"She's a liaison between the police, and we dispatch also for Hampton, Barstow, Hampton police and fire, Barstow fire. We'll get Carbon Cliff fire in here sometimes among other things, too," Chief Brasche said.

What scared her during those first few moments on the job? "Initially learning radio protocol and procedures," she said. "It was always a little scary when you had to call another agency on the 'point to point radio frequency,' or put out a stolen car message because you knew everyone was listening and critiquing you. Developing that calm, confidence and reassurance in your voice for the public and your peers" was something that only came with time, she said.



Photo: Seth Kabala / correspondent

Jeanine Clapp is retiring after working for 35 years as a dispatcher for the Silvis police.

She remembers one house fire, where a firefighter fell into a swimming pool in the dead of winter. "The call was during the night," she said. "The two firemen went around the back of the house, and fell into the swimming pool. The pool was covered with a tarp and snow." Thankfully, "No one was seriously injured."

"Safety is our number one concern for police, fire, and EMS units responding to a scene," she said. "So we ask a lot of questions. We are constantly updating them with information. As we ask the questions we're thinking about what they'll need. Such as: additional help from other agencies, power company"—needed if power lines have been compromised as the result of an accident—"public works dept, towing services, etc. It's always different and changing depending on the call. We're all working as a team; we're just not on the scene."

Chief Brasche said the department needs competent dispatchers: "As soon as the cop pulls up on the crash, the dispatcher is probably thinking, 'Ok, we need how many wreckers? Is this going to be a flat-bed with four-wheel-drive? Do we need an ambulance? Is there going to be a staging area? 'Hey you guys better start making a staging area or you're going to have traffic backing up over here.' Hey, have you guys thought about the press calling? They're calling us already. Why aren't you guys taking care of that? Get a press-release out there.'"

Ms. Clapp added, "Any kind of major event, like the first eight, ten minutes into it, you are busy out there. Doing all the notifications. Calling everybody."

She's seen the technology changed from phone banks and lines to touch screen computers, enhanced 911, and mapping that would allow dispatchers to know exactly where a call for help was coming from and monitor and map where police officers are, and new technologies keep coming. Cell phones present a new challenge, "you might get a name, but not always even that," Ms. Clapp said.

Cool, yes, but also a necessary crime-fighting tool, according to Chief Brasche. "If a cop has an adrenaline dump, and he's trying to tell you he's in one spot, you can look at the mapping system and say, 'Well, no. You're not in that spot. You're here.' So it aids officer safety," he said.

After 35 years, Ms. Clapp has retired from her post and moved, for the time being, to Lake of the Ozarks, where she and her husband have a second home.

"I've truly loved the job," she said. "I love the people I work with. They've been great. Not one day is ever the same. That's what I like about it. I never got bored with it."

