

## Worker Portraits **Faces of Strength**

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### **Working overtime**

by Megan Douglass

*Mike Thornburg enjoys working with and observing the people of this town as a YSU truck driver and a Lowellville police officer, even if it means getting little or no sleep.*



Mike Thornburg doesn't sleep too often these days. From 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. he works as a police officer at the Lowellville Police Department. From 10 a.m. until 3 p.m. he is a truck driver at Youngstown State's Parking Services. Between those jobs he might get to sleep a bit. After his second job of the day is done, he usually keeps busy with other projects. He doesn't mind this constant work, though. As a self-proclaimed workaholic, he admits that his work schedule would be too much for many people.

Since 2000, Mike has worked at YSU and the police department and he wouldn't have it any other way. He enjoys both jobs and enjoys helping people. As a life-long resident of the Mahoning Valley, he finds contentment with keeping busy and enjoys working with and observing the people of this town.

Mike started at the police academy in 1997 where he met up with a high school buddy. In 2000, while working as a guard in the prison, his buddy heard about a job opening at YSU Parking as an intermittent truck driver. Unable to get a full 40 hours working in the prison, which he needed to pay bills and maintain his and his wife's cars and his motorcycle, Mike inquired about the truck driver job. "When I started here [at YSU], I was working in the prison. So, I would come out to this job in the mornings, for YSU," he says. In the afternoons, he'd go down the road to his job as a guard.

Working at the prison was more than just a job for Mike. It was a lesson in cultural diversity. "It was an eye opener," he says. When he began at the prison, he was already a deputy at the sheriff's department, and he believed that he had already seen and heard everything there was to know about being an officer. At the prison, however, most of the inmates were from Washington, DC and most of them were Muslim.

Having no previous experience with the Muslim faith, Mike quickly caught on to the inmates' rules concerning diet and prayer, which resulted in changes in scheduling for prison staff. He recalls, "As far as training people that work there, we had to train to handle their issues. The prison adjusted to their diet. During Ramadan, they changed the scheduling for all kinds of events. I thought that was amazing, being a prison and all."

While working at the prison, his jobs were in close proximity. He went from

truck driver in the morning to guard in the afternoon with a simple change of clothes and a short drive down Fifth Ave. However, his job at the prison didn't last forever and he found himself working midnights for the Lowellville Police Department. His schedule became a little tougher.

Since Mike was hired as an intermittent worker at YSU, he was able to adjust his schedule to accommodate his police schedule. He explains that the intermittent position means "as needed," but as the union fought for more worker's rights, the 'as needed' became more dependent on how much *he* needed. That worked out just fine for him because he needs that flexibility from his second job to balance the rigidity of the first job's schedule. So, Mike began working his midnight police shifts and his 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. YSU shifts, which he still currently holds.

As he hauls down Wick Ave. in YSU Parking's Ford F-150, pedestrians jump back onto the sidewalk to get out of harm's way. "I gotta grab this sign," he says as he drives over the curb to an abrupt stop to remove a "Special Event Parking" sign.

At YSU, Mike's job consists mostly of putting out signs for events, assisting drivers with lockouts and jumps, working in a booth when he's needed to do so, and relieving booth attendants when they need a break.

Along with being able to choose his schedule, Mike likes his job as a truck driver because of his experience with cars. Working with cars is not new to him; he's been working on his own since he was 15. As a "motorhead," he spent his high school days "breaking things and then fixing them," and he carries what he learned to this job. So, helping out anyone with a car problem around campus just comes naturally to him.

A call comes over his radio:

"F-1 to 608."

"Go 'head."

"Are you around me somewhere?"

"That's affirmative."

"Can I get a relief when you get a minute?"

"Copy, en route."

On his way to give the faculty F-1 lot booth attendant a break, he says, "I mean, this job goes along with being a police officer, too. I get a lot of satisfaction out of helping others. Even if it's just someone needing a jump, I like doing it." As the attendant rushes away, he shrugs his shoulders and laughs, "If someone needs to go to the bathroom, I give 'em a break."

His love of helping others and his observant nature serve him well in both jobs. At YSU, he helps students and faculty who make the frightened and slightly embarrassed call to the office about locking their keys in their car. He observes traffic patterns and understands the right way to guide vehicles when large events take place.

At the police department, he observes the happenings in the village of Lowellville, keeping an eye on the houses that he passes every night while on his rounds. "If we notice a garage door is up, especially in the middle of the night, like 2 or 3 in the morning, that isn't usually up, we'll call the people," he says about his duty to the town. Mike says that it might seem silly to call someone at that hour about a garage door, but the locals are generally very appreciative of the fact that they are being looked after. "We justify the call in the middle of the night by saying 'Look, we keep an eye on your house,'" and the response is usually one of relief.

In addition to patrolling the streets, he also does a lot of people-watching while parked along the sides of the streets. He rolls his eyes as he says that police officers aren't supposed to park near bars, because "it's bad for their business." He feels that having police officers parked near drinking establishments would discourage drunk driving.

Mike says that all the crime that happens in the big cities happens in Lowellville as well. He nonchalantly runs down a list of problems he might have to deal with on any given night-- drugs, stolen cars, murders, rape.

He says, though, that "Most of it happens in the afternoons and evenings, believe or not." He sounds almost disappointed at the fact that he hasn't had any "exciting car chases, but everyone else has."

Not only does Mike work a nearly 60 hour work week, but he takes on any extra jobs he can during the summertime and over the weekends.

This summer, he was unable to take a vacation as he and his wife usually do at Myrtle Beach, a place that holds a lot of sentimental value for him, having spent much time there as a child with his father who lived nearby. He was too busy trying to earn an extra dollar. Trying to get a new house built on his property meant that he needed to rake in all the extra cash he could. "On the weekends, I usually see if I could do something to make some money somewhere," he says. "I was helping clean these buildings and cutting trees down for these people who lived up in Cleveland," he says of his summer.

"I'm sick in the head," he says of his addiction to work. "Sometimes I wonder how I'm keeping it together." Yet, he says that he is happy to do so much work because, when it comes down to it, he "chose to do it." And the hard work is worth it at the end of the week when he gets to relax in his garage, shooting the breeze with his friends in their "gentlemen's club" (his garage outfitted with a small wood burner), with cigars in hand.

Mike has lived in Youngstown his whole life and has enjoyed all of the jobs he's held. He smiles as he reminisces about his first job as a busboy at the Townhouse Restaurant. "Yeah, I've been through a few jobs. You can say that," he says as he remembers jobs from construction worker in North Carolina, where his father lived, to Pizza Hut employee.

He has seen and experienced the job market and what it has to offer in the Valley. He understands that the way things work in the area is probably very similar to the way things are in other places, but he still seems disappointed when he thinks about how hard it is for people to find work here. "It's who you know, who you're related to. So, if you got family who owns business in this area, you're not going to have any problems."

"I look at people at GM. They hire their family. Their kids go to school for almost nothing and then they quit. They work there, just to go to school, then they leave, which could be a bad deal for someone who would use that position and be there the rest of their lives and feeding their family that way, but I guess that's the way it is around here," Mike says of the work available to full-time laborers.

According to him, this also can be seen as giving Youngstown a defining characteristic that he is particularly proud of. "It's not a very forgiving town as far as making a living goes. People who work here fight to survive. And that's nice."

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