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Cop a Hero to Some, a Villain to Others

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Points West

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LAPD Officer Deon Joseph, whose signature tactic is to get on his PA system and order lawbreakers off his streets, arrested a man one night, and the guy threw up on the prayer card Joseph keeps in the back seat.

He hasn't yet replaced it, but the prayer said, in part: "Does God understand that people sometimes do things against his will? Of course he does. He made us and loves us all regardless of our flawed nature. But when it's all said and done, he's returning for those who look more like him."

Joseph, 34, works skid row. He is a villain in the eyes of those who think police are harassing the downtrodden, and a hero to those who welcome the crackdown on crime. Thursday evening, I saw supporters call hellos to him as he cruised by in his black and white. Friday morning I watched people at a rally call for him and his superiors to be run out of downtown Los Angeles.

Pack the jails

With homeless masses

Fa la la la la, la la la la, sang protesters on the steps of Central Station, where Joseph works.

And in reference to Capt. Andy Smith, LAPD Chief Bill Bratton and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, the activists sang to the tune of "Here Comes Santa Claus":

Here comes Andy Smith,

Bratton, Tony V

And a herd of pigs

Brutalizing and harassing

Our community.

Joseph, a well-known senior lead officer, was unshaken by the protest, but he's always struck me as an unflappable cop. I met him more than a year ago while I was interviewing a prostitute who lived in a Porta Potti at 6th and San Julian streets, just a block from the central police station. The Porta Potti got bulldozed, and next time I saw Joseph, he told me he was looking for the lady of the night, because he'd arranged some housing for her.

Since then, I've bumped into Joseph every once in a while, and lately he hasn't been thrilled with my writing. "We do more than just arrest people," he complained after I wrote that arrests alone won't change things over the long haul, because the problems are so varied and run so deep.

He recently e-mailed to say that three fellow officers had arranged to make a health insurance connection for some residents of the William Mead Homes near Chinatown and that other officers were using their own money to turn backpacks into care packages throughout December.

Joseph said another officer helped arrange emergency housing for 20 people. And he himself collected toys donated by his twin brother, also a cop, and distributed them on skid row. Joseph also has written letters to community groups asking for their cooperation.

In one, which he sent to L.A. Can, the group that led Friday's protest, Joseph asked for help in dealing with kids between 12 and 17 who were selling drugs on Main Street and on San Julian.

"I want the service providers and social groups to get out into the streets over a two-month period and provide any information they have on programs that can help these minors," Joseph wrote. "I want you to get them before I do." On Thursday night, with me in his passenger seat, Joseph was patrolling the 500 block of San Julian when he saw a man sitting on the curb with an open can of beer next to him. He stopped and asked whose it was.

"I don't know," said the man.

Joseph got out of the car and emptied the beer into the gutter.

"Throw this away," he said, handing the can to the man as a young boy outside the Union Rescue Mission spotted Joseph and called out to him.

"Did you like the toy?" Joseph asked, explaining that he had given the kid a gift earlier.

The boy smiled and nodded, and Joseph said he'd be back with more.

One block to the east, Joseph came upon a cluster of several people and pulled over. He flipped on his public address system and announced for all to hear:

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you have crack, needles, syringes, balloons, drugs for sale or you are vending illegally, you need to get off the block."

The cluster scattered. Every last person.

"You can disrespect yourselves all you want, but you are not going to disrespect the Volunteers of America," Joseph continued on the PA as he drove by the agency, which has a rehab program. That really ticks him off, he said, when people sell and use in front of others trying to go straight.

Casey Horan, executive director of a mental health agency called Lamp, said she's equally in favor of getting drug dealers off skid row. But she said since the Safer Cities Initiative began in October, with 50 new officers enforcing a zero-tolerance policy on skid row, innocent people — many of them mentally ill — have been harassed, handcuffed, cited and sometimes arrested for as little as jaywalking or tossing cigarette butts.

Horan said there have been 1,500 citations in two months, and when those people are unable to pay, they'll be subject to arrest for outstanding warrants. None of that will help anyone, she said. The arrestees are unlikely to get assistance for the problems that put them on skid row in the first place, and the churn of people through police stations, courts and jails will cost taxpayers a fortune.

"I saw a woman cross the street with a Cup o' Noodles, and they handcuffed her," said Shannon Murray, one of Horan's chief deputies, who said it appeared as though the woman had mental health issues. Horan said the officer told her the woman had jaywalked.

But Brady Westwater, a downtown activist, said he and other residents and merchants were ecstatic about the dent police have put in lawlessness the last few months with hundreds of arrests, roughly two-thirds of them for felony offenses. And Joseph offers no apologies to those who feel otherwise or who make him out to be cold-hearted.

"Anyone who thinks homelessness is a crime should be ashamed," he said, and law-abiding folks who end up on skid row through misfortune or bad choices deserve to be protected from predators. "I love these people."

Why do you love them? I asked.

"Because they're black like me."

When he first got to skid row, he was stunned, Joseph said. It's not a coincidence, he argued, that black people dominate the row. When he was growing up in Long Beach, he said, that's the group that was marginalized and written off, and little has changed. His mother, Margie Louise, who died last month, did her part for 40-some years, he said, feeding the homeless and taking in literally dozens of foster children.

"She taught me to care for people and not give up on them."

It's hard to judge any officer based on a ride-along, because he's obviously going to do and say the right things in the presence of a reporter. But Joseph seems to work with a sense of mission and pride, just like those who care for the addled and flat-broke denizens of skid row and believe many of them to be victims of overzealous policing.

As I've said before, there's no way to police away problems created by shortages of housing, full-service mental health and addiction treatment, and jobs that pay a living wage. Joseph knows all that and would appreciate a little more backup.

Until it arrives, he'll be out there with his care packages, sermons and handcuffs. Whatever it takes.