

# Citizen Police Academy Opens Eyes to Domestic Violence

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AMESBURY — The crowd of two dozen residents gasped as Detective Robert Wile rattled off the statistics: 320 domestic violence incidents in 2006, 400 in 2007 and 529 projected for 2008.

"Wait, add 20 to that," Wile said. "I just had 11 reports in the past week."

Wile was covering domestic crimes earlier this week as part of the Police Department's Citizen Police Academy, which will conclude next week.

The series of eight three-hour classes sponsored by the Police Department works to educate residents on all aspects of police work, from initial investigations to the court system. And apparently, residents have responded.

Officer Thomas Hanshaw said he had to turn people away from the academy this year, and that the department is trying to organize a fall session as well.

This week's domestic violence lesson gave some participants a clearer picture of local police work than they may have bargained for.

"I was way off on the crime questions they asked us," said Dawn Demore, referring to a quiz participants filled out at the beginning of the program to gauge how much they knew about local crime. "I come from Essex, where if anything happened there, you knew about it."

Demore was especially surprised at how many acts of domestic violence Amesbury has. A pie chart of clients at the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center made the point bluntly — 37 percent were from Amesbury, compared to 23 percent from Newburyport, the town with the next-highest number of clients.

"Is that because you're more aggressive arresting them?" a woman asked Wile.

"No, it's because of this place," Wile responded.

Wile said the amount of domestic violence in Amesbury kept him on call around the clock for the entire year before he had to cut back for family reasons.

And he predicted an increase as the economy worsens and more people take out their frustrations on family members. Not only are basic domestic assaults increasing, but assaults on pregnant women are on the rise as well, he said.

Statistics like those were sobering for the audience, but Wile worked to lighten the mood. The three-hour presentation had both a comedic screen-shot of an animated Homer Simpson throttling Bart and an eerie excerpt of a 911 call of Dorothy Cotter's murder at the hands of her husband in 2002.

Wile told the participants he needs to keep a sense of humor, even when dealing with the depressing nature of his work. Even victims he interviews might be smiling at the end of the day, he said.

"When you have to hear what happens to these women day in and day out, it wears you out," Wile said. "I like to make people laugh."

The academy participants, who ranged from teenagers to senior citizens, seemed to respond to Wile's method of teaching and to the classes as a whole.

Demore said she thought the program was outstanding, and at the end of Wednesday's class she asked for more information about the Geiger Center.

"I have some time on my hands. Maybe I can volunteer there," Demore said.