

Friends with colleagues only: Teachers, cops and others find only their peer group 'gets it'

By Lisa Bertagnoli
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Kelly Plante, a teacher at a South Loop charter school, socializes mostly with other teachers. She once walked out on a first date with a man from another field who disrespected her students with rude comments.

"I got my things and said, 'This isn't going to work out,' and left," she says.

Five years into her career, Ms. Plante, 27, accepts that her job sets her apart. Non-teachers have annoying misconceptions: "They assume that my kids aren't as good as kids who go to school in the suburbs," she says. They expect her to enjoy tons of free time, what with the early workday and summers off.

Kelly Plante finds that other teachers best understand her life, from its challenges to its satisfactions.

ERIK UNGER



Colleagues understand her better. They, too, lug home piles of papers to grade, answer seemingly endless calls and texts from students and parents, and expend energy tamping down dramas among the seventh- and eighth-grade set.

"A lot of people I hang around with are in the same field," says Ms. Plante, of Lakeview, who teaches at Perspectives Joslin. "We get it."

Teachers, as well as doctors, therapists, social workers, journalists, cops and firefighters, often find their careers don't lead to the most expansive social lives. A sense of mission, as well as intense physical, psychological or time demands, often limits their compatibility with nine-to-fivers who can mentally leave the office behind.

There are cops who aren't invited to neighborhood gatherings because nobody wants "the police" at a party, journalists who, despite fat Rolodexes, can't ethically do favors or pull strings for friends, and teachers who shun Facebook or Twitter for fear of inadvertently crossing a line with students.

Where can they turn to offload stress? Often, it's to people in their own profession, or nobody.

"There are situations you might not be able to share," says Fred Friedl, 56, chief at the Gurnee Fire Department. Confidentiality issues prevent him from discussing medical calls with anyone else; the details of horrific fires are "too gruesome" to unload on a spouse or children.

And then there's even more stress when a firefighting mission proves fruitless. "Unfortunately, there are times when you aren't able to save anybody," says Mr. Friedl, who has 50 firefighters under his command. "But you try to focus on the positive things."

GUARDED CONVERSATIONS

When **John Wills** was a Chicago police officer, his social circle consisted of cops, and only cops. The group had its own jargon — "A lot of it seems racist and bigoted, but it's not" — and its own myopic view of the world. "You're always on guard . . . you're always looking for bad things, so you don't see the good things," says **Mr. Wills**, who now lives in Virginia and writes thrillers about the lives of cops.

' Not everyone understands how stressful it is. . . . He has to make decisions that most of us don't have to make.'

— Debra Baum, whose husband is a physician

Mr. Wills and his wife tried to meet other people, but it was tough: At parties, people would whisper, "He's a cop," and he could feel them withdraw. "The conversations started to get guarded," he says, and he could feel them paying close attention to how much he drank or what he said. There were confrontations, too: "People say things to challenge you, to get you out of your bag."

The social insulation bothered his wife, a stay-at-home mom who had no circles of her own. "She didn't think it was healthy, and she was right," says Mr. Wills, 60. He left the force in 1983, after 12 years on the job, to join the FBI.

Not fitting in, feeling different and feeling like other people won't understand are among the emotional hazards of such professions, says David Klow, a marriage and family therapist at the Family Institute at Northwestern University. At its worst, such isolation can cut off professionals from the very audience they are supposed to be serving.

"It's the difference between doing the work and being caught up in the identity of the work," Mr. Klow says. Think of cops feeling at war with the communities they protect, or doctors who overlook the human side of medical care.

That's likely to lead to burnout, he adds: "You get worn down, and you lose touch with the essence of the work."

More commonly, encounters with people outside the profession can be vexing, even draining.

THE UNINVITED

Charles Childs, a funeral director, embalmer and co-owner of A. A. Rayner & Sons Funeral Home in Chicago, runs into trouble when he tries to expand his social circle beyond his friends in the business or other established buddies.

At parties, some people won't shake his hand. "They think it will be ice-cold," says Mr. Childs, 55. He isn't invited to some weddings and birthday celebrations because people view his presence as bad luck. He refuses to visit people — even his own grandmother — in the hospital: "It's terrible to go visit someone when they're ill, and they think you're waiting for them to die," he says.

Marrying someone in another field can help, but then the spouse experiences some of the set-apart feeling, too.

Publicist Debra Baum, whose husband, David, is an obstetrician/gynecologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, understands his "crazy schedule" and the isolation it causes, but she still isn't used to it.

The Highland Park couple never make social plans when Dr. Baum is on call. "We never go out during the week, and even Friday night is hard," says Ms. Baum, 49. When they do socialize, it's usually with Dr. Baum's college friends, one of whom is also a physician.

Life-and-death situations can be difficult for non-doctors to grasp. "Not everyone understands how stressful it is when you're in the moment of delivering a baby, and you're worried about a lot of different things," she says. The result is not only physical but psychological exhaustion: "He has to make decisions that most of us don't have to make."

Marrying a well-adjusted woman whose friends are not social workers helped Dan Gasper relieve the isolation of his job.

Earlier in his career, Mr. Gasper, who lives in Ravenswood, found it easier, and more exciting, to spend time with his clients — who are chronically mentally ill — than with "normal" people.

Mentally ill people "feel more comfortable in terms of talking about their personal lives much quicker," explains Mr. Gasper, 50, clinical manager of community support team services at Heartland Health Outreach Mental Health Addiction Services in Chicago.

The rest of us "don't reveal ourselves all that quickly, and you pretty much know what you're getting — no surprises," Mr. Gasper says. Spending time with healthy people "didn't feel all that stimulating in terms of a relationship."

When his wife of 10 years, Jacque Mott, came along, she tried to expand his circle. "He didn't have that many close friends when we met, and my friends have become his friends," says Ms. Mott, 57, an art instructor at Harper College in Palatine. Still, at parties, Mr. Gasper's social worker friends want to talk shop. "There are a few that are relentless," Ms. Mott says. "They won't talk about anything else."

Ms. Mott gives Mr. Gasper a much-needed sounding board. "Things do affect him emotionally," she says. "We do a lot of talking in our relationship. That helps him defuse."

Lori Hall, a therapist, says her profession can be somewhat lonely. New acquaintances may unload their problems on her — or accuse her of analyzing their behavior.

JOHN R. BOEHM



'OUR OWN LANGUAGE'

Lori Hall is a therapist, a profession known for its high divorce rate. She says her career was not responsible for her failed marriage, but it has caused her to end some friendships.

Those who insist on regaling her with the "little dramas" of their lives, which seem silly in comparison to the real drama Ms. Hall hears in client sessions every day, don't last long.

"Some people tend to drain us more than not," says Ms. Hall, 41, co-owner of Urban Balance LLC, a Chicago for-profit therapy clinic with five locations. Therapists, she adds, "have a limited tolerance for a lot of drama" in their free time.

Ms. Hall says she was warned in school that the job would be isolating and admits she doesn't make much of an effort to expand her social circle beyond other therapists and trusted friends who "get" her career. Therapists "have our own language, our own humor," Ms. Hall says. Branching out is simply too difficult, especially when new acquaintances accuse her of analyzing their behavior or start unloading their problems.

But like others who see their career as their calling, she accepts the limits.

"There's a certain amount of loneliness to this that you just have to work through," she says.

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