

Gabriele Bender

She's worked the jail, narcotics and Internal Affairs, but now Lt. Gabriele Bender's job is really murder.—by Sigrid Bathen

Gabriele Bender, 47, joined the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department as a clerk-typist in 1968, when women were not permitted to work on patrol. She soon became a dispatcher, graduated from the first co-ed class at the sheriff's academy in 1973, and went on patrol in 1976. She hasn't stopped moving up, being promoted rapidly through the ranks as she worked virtually all variety of sheriff's details: the jail, the Detective Division, narcotics, Internal Affairs and, in January 1993, commander of the Homicide Bureau. She has a tough act to follow—her predecessor was longtime homicide chief Ray Biondi, who wrote several books and gained international notoriety while handling a string of major murder cases, including the "thrill killer" multiple murder case, before he retired in 1993.

What was it like to be one of the few women on patrol in 1976?

There were the usual comments that you just dealt with—with a good sense of humor—and flung it right back. There were a few cosmetic things, like the fact that the guys could march with flat shoes in the dirt fields, and we still had to wear two-inch black heels, nylons and a skirt.

Was it hard to follow Ray Biondi in this job?

Oh, yes. Ray was a legend. He'd been in homicide for over 15 years, as an investigator, an inspector and then as bureau commander. When he decided to retire, it was a shock to everyone because he had gained worldwide recognition.

When you said homicide, you thought Ray Biondi.

There were 72 homicides in the unincorporated area of Sacramento County in 1994—a record high. Five victims were under 14 years old, and 28 were 14-25. What can be learned from those statistics?

This has been evolving, I'd say, over the last eight years. . . . We have the gangs, the prolific use of weapons, and there is no respect for human life, period. There are no family ties, no work experience, no school records, no accountability [among many young suspects]. If there are two parents, nine times out of 10, both are working. If there's a single parent, depending on the circumstances, they may not work and they may have a lifestyle that is very

similar to what the young suspects have. There is the need for instant gratification, for material things. Who wants to work at McDonald's for \$5 an hour when you can deal drugs or steal and make \$300 to \$400 a day?

Are these cases difficult to solve?

They are very difficult because when you start looking, everything is so transitory. Nobody knows anything about anything. Years ago, you would say, "This is Sacramento County Sheriff's Homicide, and we'd like to talk to you as a witness," and people would come right down. Now they don't even return the calls. And, lots of times, the victims



themselves, if they survive, won't even discuss it.

Describe a typical work day, if there is such a thing.

For the first year and a half, I tried to go to as many scenes as I could. I'm one of those old-fashioned types who believe that you can't assist, manage or direct people if you don't know where they're coming from. If someone says they've been spit on or hit, well, I've been knocked down in the dirt too. I know what constraints they work under. I may work here from 6:30 in the morning to 7 at night, and I may get four or five phone calls when I get home.

What do you do to relax and get away from work?

You can get away from it if you leave town [laughter], but even then they can still page you. S

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