

HOME

It was midnight, June 15, when Dawn and Todd Comer left Cherry Lane in a good mood after an evening watching movies with friends. Before leaving the MSU apartment complex, they briefly stopped their car at a nearby dumpster to pick up a couple of pegboards. Todd, a Ph.D. candidate in English literature, and Dawn, a creative writing teacher, are passionate thrift-store goers and call scavenging “a religious mandate.” That evening the Department of Police and Public Safety taught them a lesson about the criminal aspect of picking up abandoned material.

“Half a mile away we saw flashing lights behind us and were pulled over by not one but two police cars,” said Dawn Comer. MSU officer Britten Riggs told them they could be fined up to \$500 or receive 90 days in jail for taking the pegboards, even though they were destined for the landfill. Todd was charged with violating MSU Ordinance 26.01, which states, “No person shall remove any property from lands or buildings governed by the Board of Trustees of Michigan State University.”

Older alumni argue Michigan campus police have always been rather heavy handed. This incident moved me to reflect on the role of police on college campuses. Today, students at MSU talk about racial profiling, random witch-hunts, snitch networks and undercover cops. In honor of a new police chief’s arrival at MSU, I decided to research some patterns of police student relationships on campus.

The MSU police advertise they are “committed to Courtesy and Excellence,” but this slogan evokes cynicism in light of the undercover operation on Feb. 19, 2000. Students for Economic Justice, a Michigan State affiliate of United Students Against Sweatshops, had become active at MSU and were engaged in a campaign to end MSU’s affiliation with a corporate-controlled labor-monitoring body called the Fair Labor Association. Founding member “Samantha Volare” claimed to be an elementary education junior. But six months later it became clear “Samantha” was actually

officer Jamie Gonzales of the MSU Police Department. At a demonstration in January 2001 pictures were taken and her secret identity was verified.

Students, faculty and staff reacted strongly to the undercover operation by criticizing MSU police Chief Bruce Benson. When he retired in June 2002, after 16 years as the head of the department, some suspected it was due to this fiasco. "I think it had a lot to do with how we uncovered this incident," said Shaun Godwin, an MSU anthropology student and member of Students for Economic Justice.

Newly sworn-in MSU police Chief Jim Dunlap denies any connection. "Bruce is a good friend. I think he would have told me, but he said the incident had nothing to do with his departure."

City Pulse met with Dunlap, a man with a pleasant smile who enjoys talking about his travels to Germany, Hungary and France. Overall he impressed the reporter as epitomizing the image of a "good cop" – friendly, well mannered and with good taste.

But the police chief does not believe the undercover action was a mistake. "We've looked at some of the potential things that could have transpired [like the violent protests in Seattle]. Maybe the measure of success on campus is the fact that we had no property destruction, no injuries, and people protested peacefully."

Guidelines adopted in 2001 require the approval of President Peter McPherson for any campus undercover operation, what Dunlap calls "a slightly different mechanism." When asked if any were under way, he replied that if there were, "I probably wouldn't tell you." Dunlap said Gonzales now works as a uniform patrol officer. "Every once in a while they send her to political events," said Godwin. "It's a little reminder to us that she was an undercover cop."

Mike Price

I tried to get a sense of the history of police surveillance on the MSU campus. Mike Price pays close attention to police issues and has been a political activist since the 1960s. At that time McPherson and Price were classmates at MSU. Price, who was a theater student, dropped out "because theater wasn't addressing what was happening in Vietnam or in the Civil Rights Movement." When I met with him he showed me a large pile of FBI files he'd collected.

During the 1960s, the FBI tried to disrupt Students for a Democratic Society's activities in East Lansing. "We were considered the key trouble makers, so they kept surveillance on us even when thousands joined." Price believes since Bush's Patriot Act, campus police surveillance is turning us back to the Vietnam era. "It's not about surveillance, it's about harassment and intimidation."

After a May 1965 open-housing rally, which led to the arrests of 59 students, the East Lansing Police Department and the MSU Department of Public Safety formed a political surveillance unit that spied on hundreds of faculty and students. Its files were shared with the Michigan State Police "red squad" and the FBI. By 1976 the red squad had nearly 38,000 files. They kept particularly close tabs on anti-Vietnam groups, which were targeting Michigan State's ties to the federal government, defense contractors and Air Force and Army ROTC programs on campus.

In April 1966 the San Francisco-based Ramparts magazine even came out with a cover story on MSU. The cover was illustrated by a color drawing of Madame Nhu, South Vietnam's former first lady, in a Spartan cheerleader's outfit. The article "The University on the Make" reported on CIA involvement in an MSU project aiding the Republic of Vietnam. The Eisenhower administration had asked MSU to not only train civilian bureaucrats, but also security and police personnel, in a project lasting from May 1955 to June 1962. With more than 1,000 employees and \$25 million from the Foreign Operations Administration. "This is the tragedy of Michigan State professors: we were all automatic cold warriors," wrote Stanley K. Sheinbaum in Ramparts. At the time Sheinbaum was the coordinator of the MSU Advisory Group, which became commonly known as the MSU Vietnam Project. MSU President John Hannah, and the project's chief adviser, Wesley R. Fishel, denied charges that they were used as a front for a CIA unit, or that MSU bought guns and ammunition and trained secret police.

Inveterate scavengers Dawn and Todd Comer, an MSU graduate student, found themselves in trouble with the MSU Police when they tried to salvage pegboards from a campus dumpster. Police chief Dunlap laughed and denied there were any undercover actions since the anti-Vietnam turmoil. "I've been here 32 years. To my knowledge the operation in 2001 was the only time in 25 years that this has happened." But students around for more than five years remember this cannot be true. The department has frequently sent out so-called plainclothes officers, a finer word for undercover cops. They patrolled MSU residence halls in February 1997 in search of underage drinking and related crimes.

Students report indications that local authorities and polices are taking advantage of the growing fear since 9/11. On Sept. 21 last year the Department of Police and Public Safety sent out an e-mail seeking "three individuals ... from Pakistan dressed in their native attire." Although the police admitted that these individuals had "done nothing illegal," they still wanted "to speak with them to resolve the concerns." The e-mail also asked that suspicious

incidents be immediately reported to the MSU police.

Jacqueline Miller, a sociology graduate student, responded to this e-mail by sending an angry letter to the police. "In this current atmosphere where people are in a witch-hunt frame of mind, how could you think it conscionable to offer three specific targets for ignorant, angry people's wrath? Why not just do the job of finding these folks yourselves?" She said she sincerely doubted many members of the campus community had an understanding of what "native Pakistani attire" looked like, and, that "it vaguely resembles the attire of many other Southeast Asian, Arab, and African nations." Miller believed this and other incidents raised the question "of whether the Department can be trusted to protect everyone's safety in the context of this multicultural crisis."

But Dunlap defended the strategy. The three men seemed suspicious because they entered the office of the business school's dean, an area that wasn't open to the public. Dunlap argues in a "changed environment" not only did the police have a responsibility for security but also to the community. "If you had a serious concern over whether or not some violent act is going to occur, would you rather have 62 or 55,000 people looking for someone?"

Jim Dunlap, MSU's new chief of the Department of Police and Public Safety, is overseeing a staff that has grown 28 percent since 1995, about four times more than the student population has increased in the same period.

Kendall Sykes, former Student Assembly chairperson of the Associated Students of MSU, strongly criticized this view. "It's a good idea in theory, but obviously it doesn't deal with all of the prejudices of the people out there." He felt that it was wrong for the Police Department to send out the e-mail. "When Timothy McVeigh was convicted of blowing up the federal building in Oklahoma City, there was no racial profiling of white men." Since 9/11, Sykes, who is half African American and half Arabic, said he has had many experiences in which racial profiling was a factor. Several times a month friends with minority backgrounds have reported similar stories about racial profiling on campus. "Attending different events on campus, I found out that minority events have much more of a police presence than Caucasian events." If campus police continued to ask people to share private suspicions, they would be "just giving into the propaganda that every Arabic man is a terrorist."

According to a new survey commissioned by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, about half of Americans, or 49 percent, are willing to relinquish personal freedoms and privacies to protect the country.

Steve Swart certainly isn't the kind of person who wants to give up his First Amendment Rights. He has worked for Students for Economic Justice and now leads Direct Action!, a Lansing-based activist group, which helped MSU's Graduate Employees Union fight for a contract in March.

Since America started its war against terrorism, Swart has observed an increase of "snitch networking in neighborhoods," or what is referred to as community policing. Whereas the department considers community policing to be public relations, Swart feels that it encourages people to tell on other members of the community. The anthropologist believes this trend leads to "a policing of more and more aspects of our lives."

Dunlap doesn't share this view and would like to expand community policing from four employees to 32. He expects residents to develop confidence in the officers and report suspicious movements in their neighborhood in order to reduce crime. Dunlap points out that since community policing was started in 1987, felony crimes have fallen 66 percent. But this trend is actually mirrored on campuses across the country. It's mainly due to a strong decrease of burglary and larceny, which went down by 77 and 61 percent at MSU. And this has certainly just as much to do with the student body's rising affluence than with community policing. It raises the question of why more police are needed while the crime rate is dropping.

MSU has always had a very special police force. In the 1930s the university established the first college police administration program in the United States. Today, the department proudly recruits new officers from the University's Department of Criminal Justice. Dunlap said that about 60 student volunteers work with 62 police officers on daily activities such as lot watching, vehicle registration and ticketing. To improve the relationship of minority students and police, the department has started a "strategy team." It collects data on traffic stops to determine whether police checks are based on racial, gender or age prejudices. The action report is released quarterly on the MSU Police web site (www.police.msu.edu).

Matt Clayson

Student government leader Matt Clayson believes such self-control could be a step in the right direction, but that improving the communication between students and police could only work to a certain extent. Thus, he doesn't support the idea of more police outreach, like police sponsored dances or events. This was one suggestion from the action report to improve student-police relations. "To be honest, most students don't care about that kind

of stuff. We want to study, we want to go out on the weekend and be with friends, not with the MSU police.”

Most of the sources City Pulse talked to have criticized the high police presence on campus. In fact MSU has increased its police staff in the last seven years. In 2002 the department had 100 full-time employees, including 62 sworn officers, for a total campus enrollment of 43,366. In 1995 the department employed only 86 full-time employees, including just 52 sworn officers for a total enrollment of 40,254. This means the ratio of police has increased from 1.3 per 1,000 students to 1.4. That’s actually a 28 percent increase of staff. Other big state universities, including the University of Florida (2.1 / 1.9), the University of Texas (1.4 / 1.3), or the University of Berkeley (2.4 / 2.4) have either decreased or maintained their police student ratio.

Student government leader Matthew Weingarden points out that the high density of police in the area – East Lansing, Lansing, Michigan State Police and the MSU Police – has created a lot of confusion and inconsistency of how security is supposed to work. “For the last years especially the MSU police were really treating students wrongly. The police took a headstrong approach, almost dictating what student groups would have in terms of their security.”

Matthew Weingarden

Whereas in the 1960s MSU was well known for its political witch-hunting (the “CIA University”), today there are new categories dividing the campus community into “us” and “them.”

Compared with the 1960s, police no longer need to worry about public turmoil. Today there is more concern for underage drinking at private parties and in people’s dorm rooms. Michigan State recently received a lot of media attention because of its hardline policy against underage drinking. In April, four female MSU students pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor in connection with the death of 18-year-old Eric Blair, who drank alcohol at a party in their home the same night before he drowned in the Red Cedar River. The girls originally faced felony charges for running an “unlicensed bar” at their East Lansing apartment.

“The city decided to prosecute the case to the fullest extent of the law. It’s sad that so many lives were affected because of someone’s poor decision,” comments the Academic Assembly’s Clayson. Swart makes another point. “People fear having parties if they have to worry about a felony.” Instead they’ll get in their car and go out to bars to drink. “But drinking and driving is the much bigger problem.” This case, one must note, was carried out by state

prosecutors and handled by East Lansing police.

Hundreds of bikes fill an impoundment lot at MSU, which has another lot just as full. This summer, police impounded 1,400 bikes in a two-week period because they lacked registration stickers. Students likened it to official theft.

Swart sees an embarrassing double standard. "They'll harass students for nothing, but athletes don't ever get charged." He believes it has been "one of the most disturbing things at MSU how obviously these sports stars are being favored." A controversial situation came when MSU decided to provide a full-ride scholarship to alleged rapist Eric Knott. A nationally renowned high school football star, Knott was accused of brutally raping a 13-year-old girl in 1999. "Whenever the administration is seriously afraid of damages to their image, there seems to be considerably higher tolerance for athletes' mistakes," comments Swart.

Some students feel experiences with campus police negatively influence their impression of quality of life at MSU. The insensitive enforcement of ordinances can be a main culprit. This summer hundreds of students complained after the police impounded roughly 1,400 bikes within two weeks. On the main campus, signs were posted with impoundment dates, but in university apartments such as Cherry Lane and Spartan Village, unregistered bicycles were impounded without notice other than one e-mail. Renters who purchased bicycles during summer semesters were at risk of having them seized on any given day — perhaps before having the opportunity to even register them. Letters to The State News complained about the raid-like clearing of property. English senior Ian Coote wrote: "Give DPPS \$2 for a sticker to put on your bike in case it's stolen. ... Or, if you don't, they steal your bike — the exact crime the department is trying to prevent, right?" Dunlap said his own daughter also lost her bike in this action.

Sometimes there is a happy ending. As you remember at the beginning of this report, Todd and Dawn Comer were charged for taking lumber from a campus dumpster. On June 26, they went to the 54-B District Court in East Lansing. The "dumpster criminals" were very afraid of the outcome of this hearing. But prosecutor Tracey L. Meyer dropped charges. "We were fined \$30, which the prosecutor said was in the interest of justice. For who, I wasn't exactly sure," said Todd Comer. The Ph.D. candidate found the property description humorous: "Wood (3 Boards), Owner: MSU, Value: \$15."

Jamie Gonzales in uniform (bottom) and in the January 2001 march that revealed her secret identity.

Tammy Gordon-Stone, assistant curator of the MSU Museum, comments: "Some of these policies are authored with seemingly little understanding of campus culture. If reusing MSU trash were not a crime, campus police officers would not have to spend their time guarding garbage."

I am reminded of the movie "Brazil" (1985), in which the public believes the protagonist Harry Tuttle (played by Robert De Niro) to be a terrorist but really is a plumber who avoids complying with annoying ordinances. At the end of the movie the frustrated Tuttle destroys the building where the files and ordinances are kept. After a big explosion he is ironically covered up by these documents he was fighting against. His friends try to uncover him, but find nothing underneath. The person had disappeared.

Since MSU students are relatively well behaved — as crime statistics show — one wonders about the serious precautionary measures. Some argue it's perhaps the result of police training since the 1999 riots (after the MSU men's basketball team was defeated in the Final Four). Dunlap believes it's better to be safe than sorry. He said that at a recent police chief's conference, researchers announced violent campus crime is expected to increase significantly in the next five years. The riots reminded the police that students have the potential to be violent. But in general is it right or just to see the student population as more threatening than others because they are young? Wouldn't this be called discrimination? "A lot of it is fear mongering," says Swart. "It's beneficial for them to create an atmosphere of fears and paranoia because it keeps dissent quiet."