



## There's (almost) a new sheriff in town

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The new kids started appearing at school in March, right around the time the migrant camp in Madison opened up.

Sometimes the new kids spoke English. Sometimes they didn't. But the language barrier didn't prevent them from fitting in at school. They took the same classes as the local youth. They played the same sports. They worked on the same farms, in the same fields, in and around Esparto.

And then, just as quickly as they'd arrive, they'd be gone. Not always by choice.

"I remember when I was a kid — growing up on a farmhouse south of Esparto — getting ready to go to school one day, and we're waiting for my mom to come out to drive us to school, and all of a sudden these ugly green cars pull up to the field across the street. And all of these people start running."

Tom Lopez recounts this story during a lengthy interview at a local restaurant last month. He's going to be the new sheriff in town, and I want to know where he stands on immigration. Our conversation took place days before Time Magazine's crying girl became the literal poster child of the border detention debate. She wasn't, as was initially reported, separated from her migrant parents. But hundreds of other children were, and with the topic of migration on the nation's mind, it seemed important to know the sheriff's position on the issue. This is the story that Lopez chose that day to best illustrate his position, and the more he talks, the more you sense that what he witnessed as a school boy 40 years ago left a deep, lasting impression on him.

"I didn't know what was going on," he continued. "So I asked my mom, and she said, well, that's Border Patrol. And more than likely, those people are here illegally. My understanding then was — I couldn't understand it. I couldn't figure out how we were going to get our crops brought in if we didn't have the workers there to do it."

He goes on to say that the whole situation confused him then about as much as it does now. And that's a tough position to be in, because come January, Tom Lopez is going to be the new sheriff in Yolo County. He'll be in charge of enforcing the law, and because of it, he'll no doubt find himself in a constant tug-of-war between two warring sects of law: Federal and local.

Lucky for him, the choice won't be hard: It doesn't matter what the feds say or decide. He doesn't have to enforce their rules. He's a local law man — he always has been, and at least for the time being, he will continue to be.

A ride along at the age of 14 with a resident sheriff's deputy in Esparto is all it took for Tom Lopez to know he wanted to wear the badge.

"When I was in high school, I took administration and justice classes while going to high school at Yuba College in Woodland," Lopez said. When he turned 18, he wanted to become a reserve deputy, but not having a high school diploma briefly held him back.

With all of the required credits under his belt, he asked the superintendent of schools in Esparto to advance him a diploma

so he could become a reserve deputy. They gave him what he needed, and in 1980, he became a reserve deputy. Around the same time, he also became a volunteer firefighter in Esparto, a double-duty role that eventually saw him promoted to the captain of the Madison Fire Department.

As a reserve deputy, he spent a good chunk of his time in Winters. “At the time, there were only four Winters police officers, so you were like the fifth Beatle,” he said, only half-joking. His job duties in Winters were so extensive that the police captain eventually gave him a key to their office so he could fill out and file whatever paperwork he needed.

He worked thousands of hours as a reserve deputy in Winters and elsewhere before being promoted in 1983 to an “extra help deputy.” He was hired on full-time in 1984 and was a reserve deputy until a spot opened up across the county lines.

“I did a short stint in Sacramento County as a Sacramento County Marshall,” he said. You might not have heard of the Sacramento County Marshall’s because they don’t exist anymore. In fact, Lopez was the last Marshall the county ever hired before the merged with the Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department in the late 1980s.

The 1990s saw a number of promotions and with it came extra job duties. Lopez patrolled the county. He worked in the jail. He investigated other deputies as part of the internal affairs department. He ran administrative division that was in charge of training deputies and other personnel. He was promoted to captain in 2001 and then promoted again in 2007 to the undersheriff — the second-in-command for the sheriff of the county.

It would be his last promotion until June when the voters of Yolo County tapped him to become their next sheriff. He handily beat out his boss Ed Prieto, the current sheriff who initially filed paperwork for a sixth term only to suspend his campaign shortly after Lopez announced his candidacy (his name still appeared on

the June primary ballot because he did not formally withdraw his candidacy in time).

Prieto said he withdrew from the race because he did not want to create a “contentious campaign within our organization,” saying that such bad blood would “be divisive and ultimately harmful to the department and our mission moving forward.” But he didn’t hesitate to take action against Lopez: The day after his subordinate filed election paperwork, Prieto removed Lopez from his office within the administration building and relocated Lopez to a cubicle inside an inmate classroom at the Cameron Training Center near the county jail. Lopez was stripped of his official duties during the entire campaign, making the position of undersheriff nothing more than a mere title.

The day we spoke, Lopez said his only job assignment was overseeing the planned renovation of the Yolo County Jail, a \$44 million project that aims to expand capacity and programs for inmates. Lopez was present at the groundbreaking ceremony on June 26, but his name was left out of a press release announcing the start of the project. Lopez was also left out of the planning commission for the upcoming fiscal year’s budget — a budget he will inherit come January.

“I had no involvement in creating the budget,” Lopez said, adding that Prieto hadn’t spoken with him since he filed his campaign papers. (On Monday, Lopez clarified that he’d interacted with Prieto in March after the sheriff announced his retirement and had spoken with him at least twice in the last week. He also said his job duties had been recently expanded beyond the jail renovation project, but not to the point that they were before he filed his campaign papers and he still has not had a chance to review the budget. A spokesperson for the sheriff’s department said he would not comment on the matter because the issues were “too politically charged.” In an e-mail to the Express on Tuesday, Prieto also declined to comment.)

“I’m sorry that had to occur that way,” Lopez continued. “But it is time for change.”

Change is the platform Lopez ran on. In his campaign statement, Lopez said that the sheriff’s department’s “reputation is battered, community trust is damaged, and the department doesn’t reflect the values and commitment of our deputies and staff.” When I asked him about his comments, he said one of the things that damaged the department’s morale within the office and reputation with the public were multiple allegations of sexual harassment made against Prieto by former employees. There were three lawsuits, Lopez noted, one of which came with a sizable settlement that cost taxpayers thousands of dollars.

“I believe that community trust and the perception of the agency starts at the top,” Lopez said. “I would only expect our deputies to go out and represent me to the best they can do. And so, as sheriff, I need to be able to represent our agency as best as I can do. I don’t feel that that is what the current atmosphere has been in the county as far as our agency.”

Prieto and Lopez have different communication styles, a different way of doing things, and some of those things will be changing in January, he said. And after meeting with constituents on the campaign trail, Lopez said his eyes were open to other things that also need to change, starting with the public’s understanding of what the sheriff’s department does and does not do.

“We look at things in a different way in the office,” Lopez said of his boss. “We communicate with our employees in a different way, and we’ll move on in January.”

“When I was on the campaign trail knocking on doors speaking with people, there are a lot of people who don’t know anything about the sheriff’s office,” Lopez said. Those that did know what the office did told Lopez it was time for a change.

And he does not plan to disappoint them.

One change he wants to make is to bring back reserve deputies, the program where he first cut his teeth in law enforcement more than three decades ago. Lopez knows it won't look the way it did back then — when he was a reserve, Winters needed some help enforcing the law, but now the city handles most civil and criminal matters on its own and doesn't need the same level of help it once did. There are still areas, like Esparto and the Capay Valley, that could use a little more law enforcement presence, and that's one area Lopez has targeted for the revived reserve deputy program (the other is the rural community north of Woodland).

“The county administrator’s office has gone out and held public meetings and the citizens have come back and said we want to see our resident deputies back,” Lopez proclaimed. “That hasn’t always been a priority for the current sheriff. And so my feeling is if the citizens that elect you are saying hey this is what we want and we have those capabilities, then we should be providing that.”

Another thing Lopez wants? More resource officers assigned to schools, just in case something happens. During our conversation, Lopez noted that some schools in Yolo County are a good distance away from a dispatch center. It could take as long as 10 or 20 minutes for any officer to respond to those locations (for security reasons, the Express is not naming the communities Lopez cited as an example). School resource officers would bridge that gap, at an initial startup cost of around \$400,000 per community and ongoing costs of around \$200,000 every year thereafter.

And he’s hoping to restore the sheriff’s department’s relationship with local law enforcement in cities like Winters — a relationship that has been fractured over time. “It’s no longer a resident deputy who works down here,” he said. “We have 24 hour patrol that’s handled out of the Woodland office. And so deputies are assigned to beats. They still have a relationship with the line staff one-on-one but it’s not the way it was before.”

Lopez hopes his initiatives will get the ball rolling on restoring some of the public’s trust with what will become his office.

“A lot of times we get a bad reputation for things that may happen that might be unique or isolated incidents but that affect us all,” Lopez said. “When I was a resident deputy, I coached little league out of the trunk of my patrol car. There’s no better contact within your community, especially when you’re dealing with younger kids, than establishing those relationships that are going to be with you forever.”



When Lopez takes office, he plans on changing a lot of things — for the better, he hopes. But there’s one thing he doesn’t plan on changing, one thing that was started by his current boss and his eventual predecessor: The department’s non-engagement policy with respect to federal immigration enforcement agencies.

“We follow the law,” he asserts. “And the law is that we really have no contact with ICE...it’s been very limited in the last 10 years, it’s been very limited in my career.”

And anyway, what does it matter? For Lopez, it’s clear that his department is not in the business of rummaging through neighborhoods to tear apart families.

“I don’t recall one time asking somebody if you’re legal or illegal,” he said with a tone of conviction in his voice. “We have a job to do, and it really doesn’t matter if you’re a citizen or not.”

That job come January will look a lot different from any other job he’s held. But he believes he’s wholly qualified for the position after serving under Prieto for two decades — something, he points out, only a small number of other sheriff’s employees can say they’ve done.

What he doesn’t want to do is become a career politician. In fact, that’s why he chose to run this year: Because at the end of the day, when he takes off the uniform, he still has to take on the role of a family man.

“I’m 56. I want to be able to enjoy my retirement with my family at some point,” Lopez said. “I plan on doing at least two terms, so it’d be eight years, and hopefully at that point I will have my successor groomed and selected and prepared to take office whenever I’m ready to leave.”

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*Note: A version of this story ran under the same headline in the Winters Express. The version was truncated, directing people to read the full version online. The original online version erroneously said Sheriff Prieto had settled three lawsuits; a correction was amended to the online version, but did not run in print because the print version was truncated in a way that did not include the erroneous information.*

*The photo of the author interviewing Sheriff-Elect Lopez was taken by Express Publisher Taylor Buley.*