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THREE AMIGOS - Phil Latacz, Ryan Fitch and Frank Heaney, the newest additions to the Public Safety force, in front of their cruiser.

New officers patrol UMaine

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There are three new University of Maine Public Safety officers on patrol this fall, and students out at night have already felt their presence.

Officers Frank Heaney, Phil Latacz and Ryan Fitch, who were hired to replace officers who retired or resigned over the summer, are working evening foot patrols in UMaine residence halls, and Public Safety Chief Noel March said he couldn't be happier with them.

"We turn down a lot of applicants. We want educators, critical thinkers, problem solvers and enforcers," March said. According to the chief, the new hires fit all those criteria.

Officer Latacz is a veteran patrolman. After retiring as a sergeant from the Bangor Police Department years ago, Latacz moved to Florida where he was a detective for the Pasco County Sheriff's department. Upon returning to Maine, Latacz came to UMaine Public Safety as a way to continue his career in law enforcement.

"I really value Phil's experience. He has over 30 years that he comes here with, and you can't buy that experience," March said. "He isn't mentally retired. He's out there shoulder-to-shoulder with the other new guys, and he's already making a difference." Latacz is patrolling the Hilltop area as well as Doris Twitchell Allen Village and Patch Hall.

Officer Heaney is a former police officer from East Providence, Rhode Island. According to March, Heaney works with developmentally disabled youths, is a youth pastor in his church and is the head wrestling coach at John Bapst High School in Bangor. Heaney brings years of experience working with young people to his new position at UMaine.

"Add to that he's a fully-certified police officer. He approached us because of what he knows about this campus, what he knows about UMaine police," March said.

"I have a law enforcement background, and the opportunity presented itself for me to go back to law enforcement, helping the people I like to serve," Heaney said. He patrols around Stodder, Penobscot, Hancock, Hart and Oak Halls.

The newest officer is Fitch, who hasn't yet been assigned a beat. Fitch has been a security guard at University College of Bangor for three years. "We heard about his communication ability and his problem-solving

ability before he even came to work with us at the Orono campus," March said.

Fitch said he liked UMaine Public Safety for the training opportunities, and because he was already working with young people in Bangor. "I chose to come to UMaine because I really like working with the student-age population," he said.

According to March, there are misconceptions about what patrolling a university entails. "We try to manage our image so no one understands us as being 'Policing Light.'" March said the department brings about 500 criminal charges every year. In 2005, Public Safety charged 75 drunk drivers and indicted 21 drug traffickers, March said, adding, "There's nothing 'Policing Light' about a campus this crowded, this compact."

When people apply to be officers with UMaine Public Safety, March rejects two types of applicants right off. Some see UMaine as a temporary place where they can get police academy training before moving to another community that they'd consider a "real job." Others, according to March, come looking for a retirement position because they see campus policing as easier than other patrolling other communities.

"I want people for whom university policing is a career destination, not a stepping stone or a retirement home for their careers," said March. Instead, March wants officers who recognize university policing as a unique experience, where protecting students from their own high-risk behavior goes hand-in-hand with protecting students from others. March said officers must be vigilant of outside trespassers to the university, "looking for their sex, drugs and rock 'n roll" at UMaine.

March said he sees UMaine as a small city with thousands on campus during the daytime and 3,800 students sleeping there at night. There's a lot for his force to protect, so he needs officers who'll take the job seriously. "The University of Maine needs to be a place you can live, work and learn without being in fear."

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