

NORTH PORT

Officer's issues now include losing teaching privileges

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NORTH PORT — The past five years of Officer Josh Shelton's career with the North Port Police Department have been tumultuous.

He's violated department disciplinary standards five times, including disrespecting his superior and chasing a motorcyclist without authorization.



North Port Police Officer Joshua Shelton.
(Photo provided by City of North Port)

Shelton is also accused of false arrest in a pending lawsuit for taking 80-year-old Violet Bland to jail in 2015 for DUI when she was actually sober and suffering from a ministroke. He was disciplined in a 2013 case for arresting a man on counterfeit currency charges, when the man's money was real.

Now, questions about his conduct have extended from active duty to the classroom.

Police Chief Kevin Vespia recently revoked Shelton's teaching privileges at Suncoast Technical College's Criminal Justice Academy after students complained about how Shelton treated them.

In a memo, Vespia wrote that Shelton's behavior "not only violated the core values of the Department, but also reflected discredit upon the personnel as a member of the North Port Police Department."

According to an NPPD internal affairs investigation summary report, Shelton repeatedly demeaned a red-haired student, made fun of a student for being related to North Port's assistant police chief and threatened to have two students "shitcanned" from the academy for cutting up in class.

At least one student said Shelton "liked to inflict pain and hurt people" during hands-on training drills, according to the summary report written by NPPD Inspector Michael Koval.

"This is especially disturbing because these recruits are not being sponsored by any police agency but are paying their own way through the academy as private students and were actively being recruited by the North Port Police Department," Koval wrote.

Shelton, 34, has been a North Port police officer since 2004. He declined a request for an interview unless approved by his chain of command at NPPD.

The Criminal Justice Academy, under various names, has operated under the guidance of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement since the 1980s. Its two full-time and 61 part-time instructors teach approximately 350 students a year.

During his investigation, Koval interviewed 15 students from the defensive tactics class. He determined that Shelton violated the NPPD's policy against conduct unbecoming of an officer.

According to the report, Shelton felt that he had not been demeaning and that someone was trying to damage his reputation as a police academy instructor. During an interview with Koval, Shelton described himself as a laid back instructor and "fun loving."

Shelton submitted his resignation to the Criminal Justice Academy on May 4, following the completion of the IA investigation. He had worked there part-time since June 2010.

The conflict began soon after the March 1 class began, students told Koval. One described it as Shelton singling out people.

He allegedly addressed a student with red hair, fair skin and freckles as "Ron Weasley," a red-haired character from the fictional Harry Potter novels. The student said Shelton called him by the name at least four times during an eight-hour class and never used his actual name.

Shelton also allegedly told another student that he had a "big (expletive) mouth" like his father. That student was the son of NPPD Assistant Police Chief Mike Pelfrey.

Later in the class, Shelton heard one student tell another "you hit me in the (expletive)" after he was struck in the groin during baton drills. Shelton allegedly grabbed the students, berated them for the language while cursing himself, and then, according to one of the students, said they would be "shitcanned" if it was up to him.

One student described Shelton's behavior as "bullying." Another said he had a hard time learning with Shelton being so condescending. Still another said she wouldn't return to take more classes if she knew Shelton was going to teach them.

In an interview with Koval, Shelton contested students' allegations that he brought tension to the classroom.

"You could have fooled me," he is quoted as saying. "They were cutting up and laughing and having a good time."

Shelton said he did not recall saying Pelfrey's son had a big mouth or making the comment about having two recruits "shitcanned." He said students are always given nicknames and no student has ever complained.

"He said that teaching was all he had and he would not jeopardize that by intentionally bullying, disparaging, or demeaning anyone," the report stated.

According to the report, Shelton's police union representative was present for the interview and accused Koval of conducting a one-sided investigation. Shelton said Koval was being intentionally misled to witnesses for interviews.

Two of Shelton's colleagues at the academy were also interviewed. They both said there was nothing wrong with his style of instruction.

Sarasota County Sheriff's Deputy Shaun Burley said he felt that Shelton was joking and someone got their feelings hurt, according to the report.

"He also told me that Shelton didn't do anything out of line that other instructors hadn't done and said before," the report states.

Shelton's resignation from the criminal justice academy prompted another internal affairs investigation, after academy director Sandy Hotwagner alleged Shelton was

trying to “get back at her.”

“She believes that Shelton blames her for initiating the administrative investigation...” the report stated.

In his resignation letter, Shelton listed one of his reasons for quitting was that Hotwagner had told him that “the student is always right.” He said he disagreed with that philosophy. Hotwagner said she only told Shelton to treat civilian students with respect.

Hotwagner, who has been the police academy's director since July 2015, declined an interview about her allegations against Shelton.

But she did speak about why Shelton continued teaching at the academy after violating multiple disciplinary standards at his own department.

She said the law enforcement agencies the academy partners with, including the NPPD, act as her “eyes and ears” when it comes to determining who meets the caliber to be an instructor.

“I rely heavily on them that if there's an issue with one of their officers or deputies they won't allow them to teach here,” she said. “I've got an academy to run.”

For his part, Chief Vespia said he expects Shelton to improve.

“We expect them to do better, and I think he knows that based on the recent discipline,” Vespia said. “We're confident that he will show improvement.”

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