

BACKSTORY



Don Challis ~

Chief of the W&M Police Department

Education: Bachelor's in history from the University of Iowa and a master's in criminology from St. Ambrose University

Family: Wife Lisa and daughters Erin and Andi

Where's home? This is now home for my two daughters — we've been here for almost six years. Home for me is going to be back in Iowa forever and ever, I think. I spent over 40 years there. I was a farm kid. I'm one of seven siblings and they all live within 20 minutes of each other.

What were you doing before W&M? I was going to the University of Iowa to be a teacher; applied for a job as a security officer and I was hired. Then I took a job as director of security at St. Ambrose University in Davenport and spent seven years there, later as a police officer; then sergeant. From there I went to Northeastern Illinois in Chicago. I liked it there but, when this opportunity came open — there's not a lot of turnover in this kind of job, so when you see a position that you really think fits you, you go after it.

How was your first day on the job? I got here three days before Hurricane Isabel [September 2003]. I thought I'd be unpacking, putting up pictures, finding my way around and seeing who was who, but I was actually in a meeting with the president, the provost and the vice presidents. I got to meet my entire staff and the administration of the College in a few short days, so it sped up that process of getting to know people. I didn't have much to draw on as far as hurricanes back in Iowa, so it was a learning curve for me.

What do people not know about the WMPD? Everything we do is for the safety of our students, faculty and staff. It may not always be perceived as that, but there's nothing that we undertake that doesn't make this place safer — that even means traffic stops sometimes. Some of the official things that we do to protect students may seem punitive, but it is often in their own best interest that we take these steps. We're not here necessarily to mess with people, though that's sometimes required as a byproduct of what we do.

What do you do when you're off-duty? Raising a family is a full-time obligation — it seems like I am a combination of taxi service and ATM. I'm pretty proud of my yard. I spend a lot of time mowing and weeding; getting grass to grow. I'm a real history buff. It was a good connection to come out here with so much history so close.

Which sports teams do you follow? I'm a Hawkeye, but I'm a Cubs fan second. Being a Cubs fan helps you deal with life. It keeps your expectations realistic and it keeps you humble, because you realize that in your lifetime, maybe in your parents' lifetime, you may not win a World Series. But you keep on chugging and you keep on hoping it's going to happen.

Interview by Ben Kennedy '05