

Turning the page

Joe Verrengia now has single focus as his 25-year police career comes to a close

by Abigail Albair
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After 25 years as a West Hartford police officer, Joe Verrengia has retired, but will continue to apply the "protect and serve" philosophy in his role as state representative.

The lifelong West Hartford resident knew he wanted to be in law enforcement from the time he was a young boy.

"One of my first early role models was a police officer who visited my elementary school," Verrengia explained. "I always wanted to become, not only a West Hartford police officer, but I wanted to serve in the Community Relations Division where I would have an opportunity to make a difference in young lives."

Verrengia, an only child, grew up around family friends in the police department from whom he learned about its importance.

"I had an opportunity to do ride-a-longs with various officers. I did an internship at the police department when I was in high school, so I really became familiar with the inner workings of the department and I was so impressed," he said.

Verrengia was educated in the West Hartford school system, attending Wolcott Elementary, St. Brigid, Talcott Junior High and Conard High School.

He then attended Northeastern University where he studied criminal justice.

When the opportunity to come home and work for his hometown police department became available, Verrengia said he did not hesitate to take the offer and was hired December 26, 1989.

"I just had strong family roots in West Hartford, having grown up in town, and it was a place I wanted to stay," he said.

The community itself was a draw, not just the police department.

"Being familiar with the community and how it embraces its police officers," was an attraction, Verrengia said.

During his 25 years with the

department, Verrengia served in several positions garnering numerous citations for outstanding police work. He did ultimately achieve his goal of working in Community Relations, a division in which he served for 13 years.

In commenting on Verrengia's retirement, Police Chief Tracey Gove noted in a press release that Verrengia - who retired as a sergeant - "taught, mentored and protected our most valuable citizens - the youth in our community," while working in Community Relations.

"Every time I saw Joe, he had a smile on his face; a testament to one who loves his job," Gove said. "He will be missed."

Working with children was always Verrengia's favorite part of the job, he said.

"Over the course of any officer's 25-year career, you're bound to run into just about anything - maybe not as frequently as you would in more of a city - but I think the most rewarding part of the job for me is having made a difference in young people's lives," he said.

During his last week of work, Verrengia said he received unsolicited letters from people he had worked with when they were young, thanking him for his efforts.

"To have them write and to thank me is just so rewarding," he said. "It's not something you can put a price tag on: just knowing you made a difference."

Police work wasn't Verrengia's only form of public service throughout his career.

He served three terms on the West Hartford Town Council before he left to serve as the 20th House District representative in Hartford, a role to which he was reelected for a third term in November 2014.

He also served as the commissioner to the Metropolitan District Commission.

He said he felt one of his "greatest contributions" was during his time on the Town Council when he voted in



State Rep. Joe Verrengia recently retired from a 25-year career with the West Hartford Police Department

favor of the development of Blue Back Square.

"The Center and Blue Back Square and that transformation will make a difference for many years to come and [West Hartford] will be a much better place for our children and our grandchildren," he said.

Although he said he was always able to balance his police work with his legislative responsibilities in recent years, he said he is happy to have a single focus now.

"I was fortunate to have worked out an arrangement with the town that allowed me to successfully serve, but now just having the opportunity to put my full attention into the position: I'm looking forward to that," he said. "In no way did doing both hamper me from doing the job, I just think by now just focusing on my legislative duties, I'll be more visible." He added, reflecting on the duality, "At times it wasn't easy, but it was always about setting priorities."

Verrengia recently received his committee assignments for the 2015 General Assembly session.

He was renamed as the vice chair for the legislature's Public Safety and Security Committee, to the Judiciary Committee, to the Finance Revenue and Bonding Committee and to the Transportation Committee.

He will also serve as a deputy majority whip at large.

"As a leader within our caucus, Rep. Verrengia has the experience and

ability to help improve the quality of life for everyone in Connecticut, while at the same time representing the interests of the families of West Hartford," Speaker Brendan Sharkey said in a press release. "Joe will play a key role in moving our legislative agenda forward this session."

A background in police work, Verrengia said, has and will continue to be an asset.

"Overseeing public safety, I can rely on my police experience and I can speak to things with a great deal of credibility having been in the field so long," he said.

Verrengia, who was married in recent years and now has three step children, said he is "looking forward to a new future."

Most officers he joined the West Hartford Police Department with have since retired, as did former Police Chief Jim Strillacci, and Verrengia said he has high hopes for the "new generation of police officers."

"They're a top notch department," he said of the WHPD. "I think the challenges that we see in today's environment, with the tension among people and the police, are unprecedented. I hope that these tensions do not last long."

Retiring from the department, he said, just felt like the right thing now.

"It's nothing that I can just put a finger on," he said. "It just became apparent to me that I thought I had made the most out of a distinguished career and it was time to move on to the next chapter."

As the new legislative session begins, Verrengia said he is "just taking it all in," in terms of his new sole focus.

"It's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work," he said.

When it's time for another new chapter in the future, Verrengia said he still believes the setting for the scene will be West Hartford.

"I don't see me going too far," he said. **WHL**