

Interview with Captain Vinetta Anderton: Feb. 14, 2020

John Caher:

Welcome to Amici, news and insight in the New York Judiciary and Unified Court System. I'm John Caher.

New York State has an urgent need for court officers, especially in the upstate districts, and that means there's a wonderful opportunity *right now* for someone who just might have what it takes to join this prestigious law enforcement agency.

The court system will be administering the New York State Court Officer Trainee Examination at test centers statewide between April 15th and June 10th. Online applications *must* be filed by Wednesday, February 26th.

Today, we're joined by Captain Vinetta Anderton, a career court officer now assigned to the Court Officer Academy in Brooklyn.

Captain, thank you for joining us today.

Just to start off, if I may speak on a personal level, I just wanted to thank you and the court officers for what you do. I know from personal experience how many dangerous situations you've defused. I know there have been probably more instances where you've saved people's lives. I know judges who had heart attacks, and they are around today because a court officer was there. What I don't know — and what you don't know — is how many tragedies you've prevented by your very presence. I appreciate that and I want to thank you for it.

Captain Anderton:

Oh, thank you so much. Thank you so much. Greatly appreciate it.

John Caher:

Now first, I'd like to ask you when, why, and how did you become a court officer?

Vinetta Anderton:

When, why, and how. Back in the mid-'90s, I was getting out of the military and I had no idea what a court officer was. My brother told me about this job, actually, and he said, "You really should take the test. You're ex-military, you're going to be ex-military. I think it'd be a great job for you to get into." So, when the test came out, I applied for it and I took the exam, and fast forward 20 years, here I am.

John Caher:

Are a lot of court officers former military people?

Vinetta Anderton:

I'm going to say not a lot. Not a lot. Compared to the numbers that come through, not a lot are ex-military, but we do have our fair share.

John Caher:

So, certainly not a majority and certainly not a prerequisite.

Vinetta Anderton:

Right. Definitely not.

John Caher:

What do court officers do?

Vinetta Anderton:

We're the uniform force of the courts. We ensure that the court proceedings are conducted in a secure and impartial atmosphere. We provide security for the courthouses. We handle prisoners. We escort them from the Department of Corrections or police custody to the courtrooms. We handle juries, we supervise juries when we have a trial. We do carry firearms. We are armed, and, of course, we respond to any emergency situations in or about the courthouses. We have the power to make arrests and many other things.

John Caher:

It sounds like you're a police officer rather than, say, a security guard.

Vinetta Anderton:

We are law enforcement officers, definitely. We're not designated police officers. We are designated as peace officers. Our jurisdiction is throughout the entire State of New York. We have court officers who work as far as Buffalo, New York, and my powers don't stop once I leave the five boroughs.

John Caher:

Now you mentioned that you're armed. Have you ever had to use your weapon?

Vinetta Anderton:

I am armed. Thank God, I have never had to use my weapon on this job or any other job. That is a blessing in itself.

John Caher:

My guess is that's more normal than abnormal, isn't it?

Vinetta Anderton:

Not to have to use the weapon? Yes.

John Caher:

Now, so you came out of the military. You thought you might be interested in the law enforcement field. Why this particular branch of law enforcement rather than any other?

Vinetta Anderton:

For me personally, I feel that this is the best of both worlds, and what I mean by both worlds, when you think about New York City, you have Department of Corrections, you have the Police Department. You even have the New York State Troopers. We kind of fall in between the middle of all of them. We're not out on patrol. We mainly work Monday through Friday, 9 to 5.

Vinetta Anderton:

Call it selfish, but I like those hours as compared to a rotating shift or working nights on certain holidays. I know what days I'm off. I work in a courthouse. I'm not just working with those individuals that are incarcerated. I'm also working with individuals that are at liberty, and not just criminals, just individuals that

come into the courthouse that need help. I just feel like it's the best of both worlds when it comes down to a law enforcement job.

John Caher:

What are the requirements to become a court officer?

Vinetta Anderton:

You have to be at least 20 and a half years of age. You have to be a United States citizen, a resident of New York, and possess a high school diploma or an equivalent, and a New York State driver's license, and you're all set.

John Caher:

. What sort of a personality is particularly suited not only to the vocation of law enforcement, but the vocation of law enforcement within the courts?

Vinetta Anderton:

I think you need somebody that's pretty even-tempered. You're not just dealing with prisoners or individuals that are incarcerated. Because we have civil courts, because we have the family court, because we also work in the criminal court, you have to be able to deal with a myriad of individuals, so you have to be able to help. You need to be very even-tempered and you have to have a mindset that you want to help people, but also understand that there is a risk factor with working in the court system.

John Caher:

What I've seen is, face it, when people come to court, they may be in the most traumatic-

Vinetta Anderton:

Correct.

John Caher:

... most personally stressful time of their life.

Vinetta Anderton:

Yes.

John Caher:

And what I see from the court officers is not only maintaining order, but maintaining calm when other people may be anything but calm.

Vinetta Anderton:

Yes. When we talk about individuals that are coming to court, they may be losing their children. They may be getting put out of their apartment. Very stressful situation for those individuals and they might be under a great amount of stress, emotional distress. One of the first things our court officers are taught when they come through the Court Officers Academy is tactical communication, verbal judo in dealing with people on how to de-escalate a situation and bring an individual down if necessary and, again, try to help them.

John Caher:

What does the training entail? And how long does it take to become a court officer?

Vinetta Anderton:

The training is four months.

John Caher:

What happens in those four months?

Vinetta Anderton:

Within those four months when you're at the Court Officers Academy, we break it down into different phases. The first part is just you coming in and you're getting all of your lectures. We build up. You get, like I mentioned, your verbal judo lectures. We teach you, we talk about handling emotionally disturbed people. We talk about domestic violence and just dealing with individuals that you're going to come into contact with, general responsibility.

Then we move into the tactical portion where we get into our intermediate weapons and our firearms training. Then we move further in and we just tie it all together near the end. But it's a lot of training. It's very physical. When you come into the academy, you should be in great physical shape because it's very

demanding. There's a lot of offensive tactics, a lot of lectures. You should be mentally and physically prepared when you come to the academy.

John Caher:

It sounds like you should go into the academy being physically fit, and you're going to come out being more physically fit.

Vinetta Anderton:

Yes, you should be. Definitely.

John Caher:

Now when someone graduates, then what? Do they have any say as to where they are assigned or could they be stationed anywhere from Lewiston to Long Island?

Vinetta Anderton:

If you are going to work within New York City, then you can be placed anywhere within the five boroughs, Long Island, or, I believe, Westchester, the 9th Judicial District.

John Caher:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Vinetta Anderton:

If you're going to work upstate New York, that'll be anywhere between the 3rd through the 8th Judicial District. You don't really have a choice. You just get to pick if you're going to work in the upstate outer districts or if you're going to work downstate. Then from there, we fill in where officers are needed.

John Caher:

Let's say someone goes through the academy, someone from Syracuse goes through the academy, and they get stationed in Buffalo, but they'd like to go home to Syracuse at some point. Is it reasonable for them to think that someday they'll have that opportunity?

Vinetta Anderton:

Yes. You can always transfer. You can always put in a transfer. Even if you work in New York City and you, say, you get stationed in Brooklyn and you live in Long Island, you can definitely put in for a transfer. And you won't spend your whole career doing the commute, but we find that many people, when they get to the courthouse that they were initially put in, they love it and they end up staying and the commute becomes nothing for them.

John Caher:

What's the best way for someone to prepare for the exam?

Vinetta Anderton:

The best way for someone to prepare for the written exams would be ... It's reading comprehension, honestly, so I always say that those individuals that recently came out of high school or are in college, recently graduated from college, I think the test would be pretty easy for them because it really is reading comprehension, common sense.

John Caher:

And then if you pass that, are you then admitted to the academy?

Vinetta Anderton:

It doesn't quite work like that. Once you take the exam, the exam has to be scored. Then once the exam is scored and those individuals that pass the exam, they're given rank numbers. Then a list comes out and you'll be contacted with your list number, and after that, you'll be scheduled for the first phase of the screening process. The first part of that is the physical ability test where you have to come in and, of course, show that you are physically fit. There's a vision test, and then we take your fingerprints and move into the next phase, provided you passed the physical ability test.

And the second phase is a written and an oral psychological test that's done, and all this time you get your background investigation done.

John Caher:

Then to circle back to something we discussed before. If you're thinking of going in, it's a good idea to be in as good a shape as you can at the start.

Vinetta Anderton:

Definitely. Just because you passed the written exam in the beginning, you have to realize that this is a physical job. It's demanding in that aspect. One of the first thing we do is we assess your physical ability, so you definitely need to be in shape. And that's the first part of moving on to become a court officer trainee.

John Caher:

Sure. Now you've been with the court system how long now?

Vinetta Anderton:

20 years. I'm working for 20 years.

John Caher:

20 years, so I assume you think it's a good place to work?

Vinetta Anderton:

It's definitely a good place to work. I have no complaints, none at all.

John Caher:

Is it a congenial place to work?

Vinetta Anderton:

Yes. There's a lot of camaraderie. I think, if you recall what I mentioned before was that a lot of times people, if you live in Long Island but you get stationed in Kings County for work, that's a commute, depending on what part of Long Island you live on. And the reason that individuals don't want to leave once they put a transfer in is because of the friends that they have made, the camaraderie that comes along with the job. You just love where you work.

John Caher:

You mentioned earlier that among the benefits of this field of law enforcement are the hours and the days, and generally, it's Monday to Friday. Generally, it's 9 to 5. Does it also pay well?

Vinetta Anderton:

I think it pays well. As of right now, when recruits start out, I believe the hiring rate is maybe \$50,000, somewhere around there, plus they get location pay, 20 paid vacation the first year and it goes up from there, 12 paid holidays. It's pretty good.

And I want to put this out there. Although it's Monday through Friday, 9 to 5, we do have courts that go later. We do have night court. As you know, arraignments is open 24 hours, so that goes into the evening. Those are coveted spots.

John Caher:

I guess the next step if someone is intrigued and wants to pursue this is to go online and fill out that application by Wednesday, February 26th, and take it from there.

Vinetta Anderton:

Exactly. Yes.

John Caher:

Captain, thank you so much for your time this afternoon, and, again, thank you for your service.

Vinetta Anderton:

Thank you so much, John. Have a great day and thank you for having me.

John Caher:

Thanks for listening to Amici. You'll find all of our recent podcasts on the court system's website at www.nycourts.com. Most are also available in the iTunes podcast library and in SoundCloud. If you have a suggestion for an Amici Podcast, please let me know. I'm John Caher, and I can be reached at 518-453-8669. That's 518-453-8669. In the meantime, stay tuned.