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Paul Mitchell : I am USF St. Petersburg

University of South Florida St. Petersburg, University Relations.

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USF St. Petersburg's Department of Public Safety serves the campus community by providing a safe environment and by offering protection to people and property, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

An integral component of Public Safety are the police communications officers, commonly referred to as dispatchers – the voices at the other end of the telephone or radios – who are in constant communication with the police officers. Paul Mitchell is one of these voices.

"The dispatchers are responsible for the safety of the police officers. And we are generally the primary liaisons between the campus community and the officers," Mitchell said. He said that the dispatchers take their role seriously, recognizing their key position in maintaining a safe, user-friendly campus.

Almost 30 years ago, Mitchell came to USF Tampa as a student pursuing a degree in botany. But courses in Modern Language changed that, launching his love of Spanish and other languages. Mitchell was also introduced to Hispanic culture during a six-week exchange program in 1968 at the old campus of the University of San Carlos in Antigua, Guatemala. In January 1970, Mitchell received his bachelor's in Spanish.

After working several post-graduation jobs in sales and service, Mitchell was hired at his Alma Mater in Educational Resources, where he subsequently ran the Learning Lab. Six months later, Mitchell took a position at USF Tampa in Printing Services. Mitchell worked there for 22 years until university printing operations were privatized in 1994 and the USF Printing Services closed.

In February of that year, Mitchell accepted employment as a dispatcher in USF St. Petersburg's expanding Department of Public Safety. His new role required a daily commute across the Howard Franklin Bridge from Tampa to St. Petersburg.

In addition to his new responsibilities and completing necessary training, Mitchell settled in with the USF St. Petersburg Public Safety team. He said his personal attributes of natural patience, attention to detail and ability to function in calm or crisis, proved to be valuable assets.

"The job is always interesting because it is never the same, yet it is always the same," Mitchell said. "You never know what is going to happen on any given day." But, in all cases, he said, the dispatcher's actions must be prompt, unruffled, concise and informed.

Beyond the dispatchers' primary duties, they also are responsible for gathering information from the Florida Crime Information Center/National Crime Information Center, commonly known as the FCIC/NCIC. These databases provide crucial information for law enforcement agencies throughout the country.

Mitchell said the dispatcher's work is similar to a bridge tender. "It is not a job for everyone – and certainly not a Type A personality. One 'remains at the ready,' but often through periods of extended waiting," he said.

It is evident that this position requires patience and diligence and often tenacity – characteristics that translates well to Mitchell's activities at home. He said he enjoys reading, cooking, going to the theatre and movies. Mitchell said he is also a big fan of orchids, an interest first cultivated when a student at Tampa's Hillsborough High School gave a presentation about orchids, "the most highly developed members of the plant kingdom, orchids." However, Mitchell said he warns potential enthusiasts that "orchid growing is not a hobby, it is a disease, and an incurable one, at that."

Mitchell is currently in the DROP program after years of service to USF. Upon retirement, he said he plans to relocate to Costa Rica where he has experienced so many "serendipitous and unexpected adventures." While there, he should be able to put his Spanish degree good use!

Paul Mitchell can be reached after 10 pm in dispatch at PSD001 or by calling 553-4140.