

Did you know... 2007 graduate Kimberly Johnson received a Fulbright fellowship for her research proposal to investigate the efficiency of Azerbaijan's state oil fund and whether it can be an effective model for other countries.

Street smart: Teaching the language of mental health

Leigh Sinclair, MA '96, plays a significant role policing Denver's neighborhoods, though not in the way one might expect.

A graduate of the counseling psychology and counselor education program in the School of Education and Human Development, her role in the Denver Police Department (DPD) has become so crucial that every new officer has been taught by Sinclair about another aspect of public safety.

As DPD's mental health specialist, Sinclair trains officers to distinguish between criminal behavior and behaviors symptomatic of troubled individuals who would be best served through a mental health community, not a jail cell. "My job is to help police officers assess a potential crisis and respond in an appropriate, compassionate manner."

Following the fatal shooting of a 15-year-old special-needs boy in 2003, the mayor mandated DPD to create the mental health specialist position. Shortly after Sinclair was hired, she was conducting mandatory 45-hour training sessions for all incoming officers. "I teach communication, de-escalation and understanding the symptoms of mental illness," Sinclair says, explaining her unusual role. Few police departments around the country employ mental health specialists.

In Dallas during the late 1970s, Sinclair began tutoring low-income juveniles in Dallas who lacked access to resources that may have helped them overcome backgrounds troubled by domestic and substance abuse. After moving to Denver,

she gave up a career in advertising to become a certified addiction counselor. But she knew she had to do more.

"I entered UC Denver later than many," Sinclair says. "But my life experiences helped me recognize the importance of psychology in behavior." Among her accomplishments were initiating a family program at Project Pave, where Colorado's Governor Bill Ritter had co-founded an alternative school for inner-city kids, and serving on the boards of directors for Outward Bound and Urban Peak.

Sinclair doesn't provide direct therapy to citizens. But she says one of the great benefits of having attended UC Denver is that she can refer individuals to the university's counseling center for assessment and treatment. "The relationships I built there still help me today," she says.

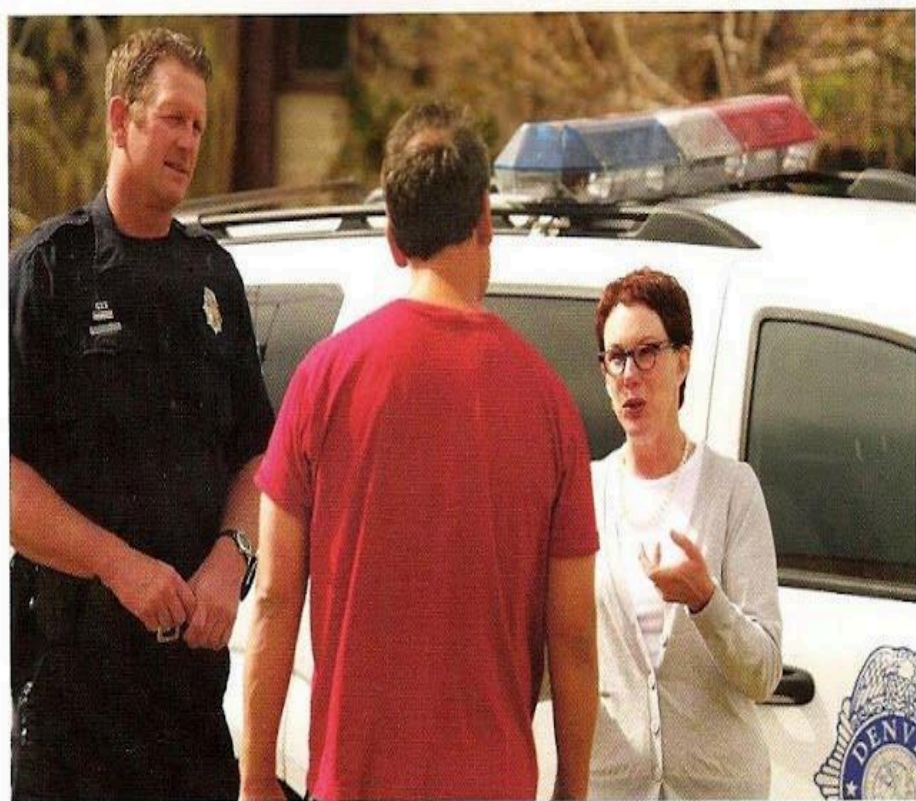
She also educates community groups about how DPD is making efforts to work with the mentally ill when intervention becomes neces-

sary. "When someone contacts DPD about a potentially serious situation, the caller is referred to a crisis intervention-trained officer."

"People suffer for many reasons—a history of violence in the family, substance abuse, a lost job or a mental disorder," says Sinclair. Getting people help isn't a job for the police, but they are able identify a need and contact Sinclair.

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With 720 officers trained to recognize mental health events, Denver's police force now is equipped to respond to such scenarios. "My impact is based on what doesn't happen," says Sinclair. "I do everything possible to avoid unnecessary incarcerations and help officers refer people to appropriate resources for possible treatment."



Leigh Sinclair teaches Denver police officers to distinguish criminal behavior from symptoms of mental illness.