From streakers to snowstorms to bomb threats, campus police see it all. And in the post–9/11 age, they have more responsibilities than ever.

By Sharon Tregaskis

It’s noon on the Friday before spring break—Dragon Day—and temperatures are well below freezing; there’s a winter storm warning in effect and snow has been falling steadily for hours. In Rand Hall, costumed freshman architects—Pac-Man and a blue ghost, a hirsute girl gorilla with a ponytail, a nearly naked Cupid clad in a diaper and sneakers with a diminutive set of wings strapped to his back—make last-minute preparations for the parade. Meanwhile, in a small lecture room in Barton Hall, Sergeant Jeffrey Montesano and Lieutenant Robert MacHenry brief thirty Cornell Police officers and a quartet of auxiliary members in orange raincoats. Montesano—who has represented CUPD in myriad planning meetings over the last few months with the student architects, their advisors, and staff from Risk Management and Environmental Health and Safety—has drawn the parade route on a dry-erase board at the front of the room and diagrammed the dragon (a non-descript worm in green marker) with CUPD assignments indicated at its head and tail and along its flanks. A cart mounted with a papier-mâché head will precede the dragon on its route. “It’s a buggy thing made of bamboo,” he says of the cart, “and its legs move.”

MacHenry highlights a choke point on the parade route near Uris and Olin libraries (“a hotspot for altercations”) and Montesano offers a warning about the burn site where the parade ends. Normally, spray paint marks the dragon’s final resting place and indicates a safe distance from the fire, the sergeant explains. This year’s heavy snow necessitated more obvious markers: three-foot stakes have been strung with red tape for the interior perimeter, while a ring of yellow tape defines an outer one. “Keep an eye on those stakes,” he cautions. An officer asks whether the engineers have built a phoenix to battle the dragon, but Montesano says no one’s heard anything. Briefing concluded, MacHenry offers a benediction. “Dragon Day seems to have toned down, but don’t get complacent—and watch each other’s backs,” says the twenty-five-year CUPD veteran. “Keep it good, keep it happy, keep it safe.”

Campus police have long juggled a bizarre roster of responsibilities—catching streakers and underage drinkers, protecting visiting dignitaries and rock stars, directing traffic and managing crowds at commencement and student protests, tracking down lost laptops and fraternity pranksters. Cornell’s forty-four officers monitor the security of animal research labs at the Vet College, police Slope Day, and issue citations for tray sliding. (They call it “Toboggan Patrol.”) Dispatchers log about 100,000 calls annually on the University’s emergency line—911 from any campus phone—for everything from a sick student who needs transportation to the local hospital to late-night complaints about a tripped breaker in a dorm to inquiries from worried parents who can’t reach their kids. A city police department might not field such calls, notes MacHenry, but
“there’s a different expectation of what campus police do. We won’t turn anyone away.” And these days, CUPD’s list of responsibilities has grown even longer and more complex. On top of policing routine infractions and dealing with quality-of-life issues, officers assess potential terrorist targets. They provide training and backup to sister law enforcement agencies, including the only bomb-sniffing dog in Tompkins County, and prepare for a wide variety of disasters.

In the wake of the mid-April shootings at Virginia Tech, concerns about campus security—and the vital role that university police play in protecting faculty, staff, and students—have never seemed more pressing. At Cornell, much of the day-to-day work boils down to stopping crime before it starts—not only providing guidance during event planning, as Montesano did with the largest was the Party at Helen’s, an alcohol awareness event at Helen Newman Hall during freshman orientation. New students were given a private tour of the building, with officers assess potential terrorist targets. "The biggest change has come in the growth awareness of institutional threats that have little to do with students," says Chief Curtis Ostrander, who trained at the FBI Academy and put in twenty years with the IPD before coming to Cornell. "What would we do if?" he asks. "This is the game we play in law enforcement all the time, and the University has to do that, too." Insights come from reports of challenges faced by other colleges and universities, from training with federal law enforcement officials, and from debriefings after events on campus. "We’re not here to scare people, but we’re constantly striving to learn what threats are on-campus and what threats are off-campus that could come on campus," says Ostrander, who co-authored Crime at College: The Student Guide to Personal Safety. "We look at these things on a daily basis. Sometimes it’s through training. Sometimes it’s a newspaper article.

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Catastrophes like 9/11 and Katrina revealed at least one respect in which CUPD was ahead of the curve—collaboration with other law enforcement agencies. "When I came here, I was genuinely surprised at how well the agencies got along," says Ithaca Police Chief Lauren Signer, who joined the force in 1999. "I’ve learned that that’s one of the secrets of success. When sometimes things go wrong, we have to work together. Otherwise, the next wave of help for us, from the minute we put in a phone call, is three hours away.

In May 2005, when the local Wal-Mart reported what appeared to be a pipe bomb in the parking lot, Signer called Ostrander, who had CUPD officers secure the lot and control traffic on the nearby four-lane highway, and sent along Sabre, a seven-year-old black Lab who joined the force in June 2001 as an explosive-detection dog. "We backfill and move in and out for each officer," Signer says. "The dog does his job."

Stefanie Green

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CUPD plans for the worst

At the west end of Barton Hall, below the indoor track and bleachers, winds a maze of hallways punctuated by locked metal doors—the Cornell University Police Department’s headquarters. Behind one of the doors, a storage facility has been converted from what was once the Army ROTC’s indoor rifle range, where the cinderblocks lining the far wall still bear the scars of long-abandoned, larger-scale spills. Boxes of gas masks and filters crowd the top floor. Closer to eye level, a dozen bright-red riot-gear rubbermaid bins contain the information and tools needed for Cornell’s administrators to respond to a major disaster.

In the event of an emergency, officers would retrieve these bins, each labeled for a critical unit on campus—Gene- net Health Center, Environmental Health and Safety, Risk Management, Human Resources, and Information Technology, among others—and haul them into a nearby conference room, converting it into the University’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Representatives from each unit would arrive to coordinate the response, relying on power from a generator and the contents of their bins: telephones, maps, printouts of police reports, laptops with backup files.

As public has become more aware of the challenges posed by natural and man-made disasters—the school shootings at Columbine and Virginia Tech, the New Orleans upheaval in the weeks after the World Trade Center collapse, the disruption of myr- iad Gulf Coast schools in the wake of Katrina—campus police and administrators have acknowledged that their preparedness is not only a direct result of the 1993 blizzard that shut down highways throughout the Northeast and revealed that CUPD’s Crown Victoria sedans were not an adequate form of transportation for a campus with a student body of 30,000.

CUPD has implemented a number of measures to prepare for a crisis. For example, last year the department purchased new school buses and will have them at the ready if they are needed. It also has implemented a number of new procedures and training programs, including simulations of different types of disasters, such as a fire in a dormitory that required officers to clear the building and evacuate students.

The department has also begun to use a new software program that allows officers to quickly access information about the university’s facilities and emergency procedures.

In addition, CUPD has established a network of volunteers who can be called upon in the event of an emergency. The volunteers are trained in first aid and CPR, and they are stationed at key locations around campus, such as the student center and the hospital.

Despite fifteen years on the Cornell campus, contributing editor SHARON TRIGASKIS ’95 has yet to run afoul of CUPD.

CUPD police chief Lauren Signer