

Following the 'Blue Bloods' path

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By Mike McKibbin

Law enforcement runs in the Wheatley family.

Quinton Wheatley graduated from the Colorado Mountain College Colorado Law Enforcement Training Academy this year, 16 years after his mom and dad did the same thing.

"I didn't really think about it until I was old enough to start wondering what I wanted to do," Wheatley said. "I guess 21 was old enough and I had enough life experience."

The program is based at the Spring Valley campus outside Glenwood Springs, but this year's commencement was held at the college's Rifle campus Friday, May 5, with commencement speaker Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper. Assistant Program Director Stu Curry said since CMC is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, the college invited to the ceremony alumni, many of whom are now police chiefs, assistant chiefs or detectives or hold other positions. To ensure room to seat everyone, the event was moved to Rifle.



Quinton Wheatley leaves the packed auditorium at Colorado Mountain College's Rifle campus. This year's graduation was held at the Rifle campus because of the large number of alumni and current and past CLETA faculty attending. Wheatley's parents are both alumni of the program. Photo Ed Kosmicki

At the ceremony, Gov. Hickenlooper received an honorary Colorado Mountain College diploma, a Colorado Law Enforcement Training Academy Certificate, in recognition of his exemplary leadership in public safety within the state of Colorado.

The college's CLETA program began in the mid-1970s in the Eagle/Vail area and moved to Spring Valley in the late 1980s. The CMC academy has graduated over 1,400 officers and placed graduates in more than 100 Colorado law enforcement agencies.

The program has helped to educate and train most of the officers who now protect and serve the state's central mountain jurisdictions. Active-duty officers teach between 60 to 70 percent of the curriculum, so it is current and field-tested.

After deciding to follow in the footsteps of both parents, the now-27-year-old Wheatley has been offered and accepted a position as a deputy with the Pitkin County Sheriff's Office.

His mother, Penny Paxton, and father, Kirk Wheatley, were in the same class in the fall of 2001. Paxton was the first female police officer and sergeant with the Basalt Police Department and now works for the State of Colorado's Marijuana Enforcement Division. Kirk Wheatley was an Eagle County Sheriff's deputy and is now an Aspen police officer.

Having two cops as parents was different for Quinton Wheatley as he grew up.

"Most of the other kids knew what my parents did," he said. "Especially my mom, because she was a school resource officer. I just told the other kids that their parents all had jobs, too; mine were just a little more public."

Curry is himself a program graduate from the class of 2000, the year before Wheatley's parents, and the first one overseen by program director Kevin Brun, who plans to retire at the end of the year, when he will have helped 45 classes of officers begin their careers.

"The strength of the program has always been the partnerships with nearly all the agencies in the region," Curry said. "We have about 25 to 30 adjunct instructors and they're all active officers that represent the entire geographic area."

For example, Curry said law enforcement officers from Aspen, Pitkin County, Carbondale, New Castle and Vail, as well as from the Glenwood Springs Police Department, Garfield County Sheriff's Department, Eagle County Sheriff's Department and Snowmass Village Police Department, plus a retired Colorado State Patrol trooper, were among those who taught classes this year.

"They do a great job and they're always trying to improve," Wheatley said. "It's good to know that we have some of the best training at a smaller academy right here."

Wheatley said the compressed, one-semester, 16-week program helps students "test yourself, see how much you can learn and what you're capable of."

He said he had not yet decided what direction to take his law enforcement career.

"I just want to be proficient and gain as much experience as I can at the entry level," he said. "I really like teaching, so maybe helping train at the academy as an adjunct instructor at some point."

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