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Happy Trails

The ad was seeking a karate instructor for the campus recreation department. A pair of students — sisters, athletes, second-degree black belts — threw their collective hat in the ring.

“We were at UC Santa Barbara on financial aid and scholarships, and we were looking for a job,” one of those sisters, Cathy Farley (then Franz), recalled recently. “‘Two for the price of one,’ we said, ‘We promise we’re really good.’ We had traveled all over competing, even instructed in Oceanside — marines, adults, kids. They said they couldn’t hire students for a staff job, but they told us the police department had student positions. We walked right down the hill to PD and got hired on the spot.”

And so began, in 1983, Cathy Farley’s storied tenure with the UC Santa Barbara Police Department. Today, a mere 35 years later, she departs the campus where she ran track as a student athlete then blazed trails as a female officer.

“I was 19 years old when I first walked through the front door of the UCSB police department and got a job, my sister and I,” said Farley, whose first role was on the PD’s Bicycle Education Safety Team (later merged with the Community Service Officers program). “I’ve lived a lifetime here. The department, this campus, has been family. I feel like I have accomplished so much and it feels like it’s time for me to step aside and let others have this opportunity.”

And what an opportunity it’s been for her.

Blazing trails

From work study to parking services to summer administrative work at Isla Vista Foot Patrol as a student; from officer to sergeant, captain and now assistant chief as a career member of the department, Farley has, in her own words, “done about everything you can possibly do in the department besides being chief.”

That’s putting it mildly.

Farley also was among the department’s first female officers and was its first-ever to have a baby and return to the beat (she ultimately had three kids). Supporting other women in law enforcement was a natural priority. She was the driving force behind UCSB PD’s participation in the California Chiefs Women Leaders in Law Enforcement Conference (they’re sending more officers every year) and is working to create a peer support group for UC and CSU women in law enforcement.

“It’s a sisterhood,” said Farley, whose oldest daughter is now an officer with UC Irvine Police. “We’re very competitive people, but we’re supportive. We’re not competing against each other. For so many years there hadn’t been many women in this profession — definitely not when I first became an officer. But UCSB has always been very supportive. When I was a sergeant, half of all sergeants in our department were women, and you don’t see that too often.”

In 2012, Farley completed a rigorous 10-week training course at the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia — an opportunity afforded only 1 percent of law enforcement officers nationwide. Soon after, she was promoted to assistant chief at UCSB, then a new role and, to date, the highest rank held by a woman in the department.

Current Chief Dustin Olson recalled Farley as “warm and welcoming” from the time he arrived at UCSB in 2009.

“It became readily apparent that she was very talented and was passionate about campus safety and the profession of law enforcement,” Olson said of Farley. “As a result, I nominated Cathy to attend the prestigious FBI National Academy and it was at the academy graduation ceremony where I was able to promote her to Assistant Chief.

“Cathy leaves a strong legacy of mentorship and leadership in law enforcement,” Olson added. “Many citizens, students and law enforcement officers have benefited from having Cathy on their team and leading from the front. There are not words to

express my gratitude or appreciation but my second-in-command will be missed and I know that she will do a terrific job moving forward. I will certainly miss working with Cathy."

Rolling with it

There's a popular country song called "Life Changes" that goes, in part, like this: "Ain't it funny how life changes / You wake up ain't nothing the same and life changes / You can't stop it, just hop on the train."

Cathy Farley loves this song. It's all true, of course, and, she said, apropos of nearly all her life experiences so far.

Moving with her family from Chicago to California as a kid and transferring to UC Santa Barbara as a teen athlete. Landing a student job at the UCSB Police Department and parlaying that — nearly accidentally — into a full-time gig after graduation. Pregnancy. Cancer.

"I'm a planner and I love structure but you've got to have that flexibility," Farley said of her ability to roll with downs as much as the ups. "Having my first child a couple years into being a police officer wasn't in the game plan, but having children was critical to me. And I've always had chiefs who were supportive. It's just, 'Ok, we're going with this and we're going to make it all happen.' Another huge one was cancer. Life changes."

The diagnosis of high-stage breast cancer was in 2008. Determined to beat it, she had a lot of help. The entire department — and many in the community — shaved their heads in solidarity with Farley, left bald by her treatment.

"UCSB is literally like a big family," Farley said as she readied for her last day. "And there are smaller families within, like our department. Our civilians, dispatchers, administrative support, officers — the leadership at every level is just amazing. I've been here 31 years and worked with some really good people, but never have I felt it's been so cohesive as it is now. I'm like a mama bear. I look at our team and I'm just amazed by them. They're all just so committed to the job they do and to this community."

A new story

That’s saying something. This coming from a woman who rose through nearly every rank in her department, who has served on the countywide Sexual Assault Response Team and the regional Isla Vista Safe Committee, who has been a steadfast supporter not only of her peers, but also of the countless students she has encountered.

Some of Farley’s proudest moments, she said, have also been the most difficult.

“I’ve seen a lot of things — reports of sexual assault and domestic violence — things that really touched me,” Farley said. “Nobody wants to take those kinds of reports. You want someone doing it who is compassionate and who cares to do it right. That became one of my passions as an officer, as a sergeant, and to this day.

“Also, over the years, the many students I’ve had to cite or arrest, sitting and talking with them and they feel it’s the end of world,” she continued. “‘No, it’s not,’ I’d tell them. ‘You made a mistake. You can come back from this.’ I look, and we as a department look at the students as our future and we have the ability to have that impact on them.”

She may be leaving UC Santa Barbara, but Farley isn’t slowing down her drive to support students: Monday she’ll be sworn in as the new chief of police at Santa Maria’s Allan Hancock College. In a way, it’s trading one home for another — all of her kids went through Hancock before transferring to other institutions.

“It’s a closing of one chapter and an opportunity to start a new story,” Farley said of her departure. “I’m looking forward to staying connected with my UCSB family while going up to Hancock and being part of a new family, and bringing my energy and passion to that family. Life changes.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.