

# From deputy to undercover teen druggie

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NORTH COUNTY — Armed with a two-month crash course in undercover drug buys, a youthful wardrobe from Forever 21 and a lot of material from Facebook, the sheriff's deputy identified only by her code name "A-2" was ready to go back to high school.

But could a woman in her late 20s realistically pass as a teenager? Yes, it turns out, and quite successfully.

For one semester, the "transfer student" made new friends, did homework and took tests — all with the ultimate goal of covertly ferreting out drug activity among fellow classmates.

The yearlong sting included two other undercover deputies. Together the trio operated at four North County high schools — Ramona, Poway, Mission Hills and Abraxas — with the investigation culminating last week in the arrests of 19 juveniles and adults.

This type of deep undercover work at San Diego County high schools is rare but was popular in the 1980s and early 1990s as a way to stem growing drug abuse among teens.

The method resurfaced as a possibility following a rash of drug- and alcohol-induced teen deaths in the North County.

Dubbed "Operation A Team," the recent undercover effort was as much about educating law enforcement, schools, parents and teens, as it was about getting drugs off the street. And deputies A-1, A-2 and A-3 were the eyes and ears.

The Sheriff's Department is keeping their identities secret to protect ongoing investigations, but one of the deputies was allowed to give a telephone interview to reporters.

## Getting ready for school

For many, the thought of going back to high school is the stuff of recurring nightmares.

Deputy A-2 is fortunate she never had those dreams as an adult. But that didn't cut the anxiety about walking a new set of hallways.

To prepare, she and the two other deputies spent two months on the job with the sheriff's narcotics unit, learning the art of the undercover drug buy.

"It was nerve-racking at first, but after a few times I started to get comfortable with it," she told U-T San Diego.

Next, she had to work on her image. She paired current teen styles from Forever 21 with a Bob Marley T-shirt to show she was friendly to the drug culture. She wore no makeup.

“She already looks very, very young,” said sheriff’s Lt. Hank Turner of the Narcotics Task Force. “It wasn’t a lot of effort.”

She spent hours on Facebook and the Internet brushing up on pop culture and picking up new lingo.

When it was time to start school, no one at the campus was told of her undercover role — not even her fellow sheriff’s deputy who works as a school resource officer there. Her family was also kept in the dark. The school district superintendent was the only one in the loop.

Her first job on campus was to make connections.

“It’s hard to get into a specific type of group, with the way they dress and you have to have common hobbies with them and talk about Justin Bieber and what not,” she said.

“I went into class and started passing notes to kids, asking questions and talking about the teacher, and what I realized is kids don’t pass notes anymore,” she said. “Everyone is texting in class, even though they’re sitting right next to each other. So that was a way to meet people, get numbers, have conversations and meet friends.”

Within a few weeks, she found a group to pal around with.

She also learned how simple it is to buy drugs — simpler than when she attended high school about 10 years earlier.

“It’s surprisingly easy to find drugs in high school because the conversation about drugs is so open, and it’s not a specific group using those drugs, it’s everybody,” she said.

Much of that conversation happens on social media, where drug deals are often set up and parties are advertised, she quickly learned.

“Everybody knows everybody’s business,” she said. “If you’re buying (drugs) from one person, everybody knows about it, so it’s hard to buy from anyone else.”

## **Mingling with drug users**

As she infiltrated the drug community, she had to avoid situations where she might be expected to actually use the product.

“On a day-to-day basis, I was being invited to go to houses, go to parties, go to school functions, and I’d always have to come up with an excuse. That was very hard.”

Sheriff’s Deputy Bonnie LeFort navigated the same hurdles 26 years ago, when she spent a year undercover at Monte Vista High School in Spring Valley.

In an 1987 interview with The Tribune, she discussed the necessity of avoiding close friendships.

“Your job isn’t to make friends. Your job is just to identify and ultimately arrest” drug dealers, LeFort said.

Avoiding the close personal relationships also helps lessen the possibility of entrapment as a defense when you have to later go to court and testify against those arrested, said LeFort's then-supervisor, Lt. Alan Fulmer.

North County defense attorney Peter Liss, who is not involved with this case, said undercover drug operations targeting minors are troubling because it's "like shooting fish in a barrel."

"You are dealing with an age group that's responsive to peer pressure, they're naive, vulnerable," Liss said.

"If you act like their friend, which these undercover cops do, over time I think you can persuade nearly any kid to provide you with a small amount of drugs."

On the other hand, targeting adults dealing to kids is "fair game," he said.

During the recent operation, the three undercover deputies purchased marijuana, heroin, cocaine, oxycodone and hydrocodone, both on and off campus. The amounts tended to be small — a gram of marijuana or a dozen pills, according to charging documents.

Deputy A-2 said prescription pills remain among the most popular, especially because the drugs are so easy to obtain from parents' medicine cabinets.

The experience led her to share this advice with parents: "Be more involved in your kids' lives, as far as social media and their phones, what they're doing and who they're hanging out with. A lot of stuff is taking place on phones and online."

For all the troubled students she met, there were good kids, too.

"I don't want to send the message that at school everybody is bad and that everybody is doing drugs, because there are good kids in high school who have their heads on straight," she said.

While her main focus was on drugs, other work went along with maintaining her cover — like homework. She did just enough to get by, so as not to draw attention to herself. Dance class served as a respite from the academics.

Only once did she fear she'd been made as a "narc." She had befriended a girl who was being bullied, and she anonymously reported the behavior to the school resource officer, who intervened. When the principal and officer called her into the office, she thought for sure her cover was blown. But they just wanted to interview her about the bullying.

When it was announced last week that an undercover deputy had been at the school, the school resource officer was positive he knew who it was. He wasn't even close.

For now, Deputy A-2 is headed back to patrolling a beat in a khaki uniform, which is what most other deputies with only two years on the force are doing. But she's up for the thrill of another undercover assignment.