

Elizabeth Robinson, 66, blazed trail as patrol officer

By Francesca Jarosz and Diana Penner, Indystar.com Online News
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Elizabeth Robinson, who became one of the first two female police patrol officers in the nation, died Wednesday at Indiana University Hospital. She was 66.

In her 22-year tenure with the Indianapolis Police Department, Robinson performed duties that included protecting dignitaries who visited Indianapolis and going undercover in the vice unit, overcoming discrimination from male officers along the way.

Robinson's compassion for the underdog drew her to police work when she was growing up with her four siblings on Indianapolis' Near Eastside, said her sister, Kathy Anderson.

"She always wanted to go into law enforcement," said Anderson, who described her sister as a straight-talking tomboy whose compassion for others wasn't always apparent. "But she said, 'I don't want to sit behind a desk.' "

Instead, Robinson took assembly-line jobs at RCA and Western Electric before joining the Police Department's Executive Division in 1967. She was assigned mostly secretarial work until the next year, when she and partner Betty Blankenship persuaded former Chief Winston Churchill to allow them to become patrol officers. By 1974, she had come to be known as one of the best pistol marksmen in the department, according to Indianapolis Star archives.

But she still encountered discrimination in her early days in the department. Donald R. Goeden, Robinson's widower and a 20-year IPD veteran, said older men were resistant to Robinson's appointment. One commander assigned her mostly dogfight runs and missing children until she won him over with her hard work. She also was required to carry a gun in her purse and wear a skirt and high heels, which she had to kick off if she needed to pursue a suspect, according to a news release issued by the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department.

Robinson's IPD tour included work in the narcotics, vice and pawn units. She also worked in special investigations, where she provided personal protection to dignitaries such as Ronald and Nancy Reagan. She retired from the department in 1989.

During her tenure, Robinson thought she was simply doing a job she loved, but Goeden said she later understood her impact. "She and (Blankenship) realized what they had accomplished, and they were very proud of it," he said. "It gave other women a chance to do things." Maj. Rebecca Lake, currently the highest-ranking female officer with IMPD, said Robinson made it easier for women like her to succeed in law enforcement.

"I did not have to face any of that (discrimination), thanks to them," said Lake, who did not personally know Robinson. "They did open the door for us, and they had to be strong, resourceful, self-sufficient and really kind of tough-skinned."

Robinson, a nonsmoker, was diagnosed with lung cancer six years ago. Anderson said she was struggling with kidney failure that was believed to be associated with her cancer treatment. Besides her husband and sister, survivors include stepson Kevin D. Goeden, sister Diane Gosnell, brother Jim Coffall, two grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.