

Cape Argus

Mitchells Plain's sheriff breaks the mould

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By Kieran Legg



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Hayley McHelm will take over as Mitchells Plain's sheriff of the court in October. Picture: David Ritchie

Cape Town - She might be the new sheriff in town – but there will not be any swingin' doors, tobacco-chewing deputies or "wanted" posters at Hayley McHelm's new office.

Being a sheriff has changed a lot since the days of six shooters, chasing outlaws and claiming bounties in the Wild West. McHelm expects to spend most of her time behind a desk, managing her deputies and executing court orders.

But the sheriff, who admitted that she did not own a Stetson hat or a pair of snakeskin boots, is not complaining about the change of pace.

The Eerste River woman was one of 71 new sheriffs appointed by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development in an effort to fill vacant offices across the country.

Her appointment will bolster the number of women in the position, marking a shift in what was and still is a male-dominated profession.

According to the department, women still only represent 22 percent of the country's 365 sheriffs.

Reaching the position was the realisation of a lifelong dream for McHelm, who has been working in the sheriff's office in Wynberg East for more than 10 years.

"I applied once before for the sheriff's position but it didn't work out. So when I got the news, I was really excited and nervous at the same time... The new job will be a lot of responsibility," she said.

McHelm, who is now a deputy, officially takes over as Mitchells Plain's sheriff in October. But she will be busy in the upcoming months arranging her new office space and staff.

The sheriff's office in Mitchells Plain South serves the local high and lower courts.

McHelm's duties will consist primarily of executing court orders, such as evictions and tax seizures, as well as arranging the safe delivery of court summons.

McHelm said her time working for the Wynberg East office had prepared her for some of the more volatile situations.

"In this area there are a lot of evictions, and they can get a bit tricky. I don't think Mitchells Plain will be any more difficult."

But on the whole, she said the job was relatively safe. "What we try and do is talk to the people and let them know that we are just doing our job."

Maintaining one tradition of their Wild West roots, sheriffs and deputies are still allowed to carry firearms. But McHelm, once again defying the stereotype, prefers to head out without a gun strapped on her hip.

"I'd rather use my words to get out of a bad situation," she said.

Justice Department regional head for the Western Cape Hishaam Mohamed said the appointment of McHelm and the other 70 sheriffs was just the start. Nationally, there were still 43 vacant offices that the department needed to filled.

kieran.legg@inl.co.za

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