

Reflections on an Obligation
By John R. Hartsock, District Education Officer

As the Executive Officer of the University Police Department at The Ohio State University, I recently had the sad and difficult duty of handling the funeral arrangements for a fellow officer, friend, and brother Mason killed in the line of duty, Officer Michael Blankenship, a member of Westgate #623. During the course of that difficult task, I was reminded of one of our important obligations as a Master Mason. One that we tend to take lightly at times, but one that is a fundamental precept of our order. It was the source of that reminder that made it so striking, for it appeared without warning and was totally unexpected.

As is usually the case at a police funeral, an Honor Guard was posted during viewing hours at the funeral home. As supervisor of the Honor Guard and family liaison officers, I had just completed changing the Guard on the casket and was walking through one of the numerous small rooms in the funeral home. I observed a young girl sitting by herself in a corner crying so hard that her entire body was shaking. I approached her and holding out my hand, ask whether I could help her. She looked up at my uniform, then took my hand in hers and turned it over so that my ring was visible, then said "You're a Mason!" and jumped to her feet and hugged me. After she composed herself, she explained why she had hugged me, and it is THAT story that we as Master Masons need to hear.

The girl is tiny, maybe 4'10" tall and 85 lbs. soaking wet, just 17 years old and a Freshman at Ohio State. She is from a small town in Tennessee, her father was a Master Mason and was killed in an accident when she was 11. Every month since his death, someone from the Lodge has contacted her family to assure that they were doing well. Sometimes in person, sometimes by telephone. when visits were made in person, she would notice that many times another man or men would arrive within a couple of days to fix something on the house. As she and her younger brother grew, she noticed that many of her teachers and businessmen in the town were always interested in how the family was doing and "did she need anything." She came to recognize that all of them were Masons.

When she got ready to leave for college, she received an envelope containing 10 new \$100 bills, with a note enclosed saying "This is to help with expenses not covered by your scholarship." She doesn't know where the money came from other than it is from her father's Lodge.

Officer Blankenship taught Women's Self-Defense classes for students, staff and faculty as part of his job with the Police Department. This girl had been one of his students. Before taking the classes however, she had called her Mother and asked her to sign a permission form (since she was not yet 18). Her mother was reluctant, fearing she might be injured due to her small size. "It's OK, mom. The instructor,

Officer Blankenship is a Mason,” she said on the telephone. The discussion was ended with an approval.

She had completed taking her last class of the self-defense course from “Officer Mike” less than one hour before he was killed....

“I will aid and assist all worthy distressed Master Masons, their widows and orphans.”

In less than 10 minutes, I was taught the real meaning of that phrase by a small Lodge somewhere in Tennessee, through the mouth of a 17-year-old girl, whose last name I don’t even know. I gave her my business card with both work and home telephone numbers and instructions to use it if she had any problems or needed help. I gave her a second card to be sent to her mother.

The full meaning of what she had told me didn’t really hit until the next day. Long hours and high stress slow down the thinking processes. When it did hit, it was like a ton of bricks.. she by example, posed the question, “Have you met and are you meeting your obligations to your widows and orphans?”

All I can ask, my brethren, is that each of us reflects on that question, then act accordingly.