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A veteran officer offers tips to help fellow cops cope

By Brent Johnson
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Clarke Paris calls it "cop stew."

It's the uneasiness that slowly boils inside a police officer's psyche after witnessing so many cases of rape, murder and theft. Often, Paris said, the officers ignore it — thinking they have to keep up the perception that they're as unfazed as the steely, cool cops portrayed in movies, like Bruce Willis in "Die Hard" and Mel Gibson in "Lethal Weapon."

"Cops are great actors," said Paris, a sergeant in the Las Vegas Police Department who travels around the country warning officers about the dangers of bottling up the emotional baggage that comes with the job. "We hide it all the way up to the end, and no one knows."

That's part of the reason more officers commit suicide than are killed in the line of duty, Paris told an auditorium full of cops yesterday at Middlesex County College in Edison, the latest stop of his "The Pain Behind the Badge" program.

Paris and his wife Tracie are expected to speak to more than 500 police officers from across the state — and from other places, like Pittsburgh and Boston — over the two-day seminar.

"That shows the need for this exists," said

SEE **PARIS**, PAGE 28

Paris

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

Andrea Craparotta, an official with the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office, which is sponsoring the program with the county freeholders and the county police chiefs association.

Paris, a 25-year veteran of police work, said only 2 percent of the 18,000 police agencies in the U.S. have suicide prevention programs for their officers.

Male cops 50 or older are at the highest risk for suicide; female cops of any age are the lowest, he said. Paris, who has been touring the program for the last four years, was inspired to create it after his own pot of "cop stew" boiled over. One day, he was called to a pair of suicides: an 83-year-old man who had cancer and a 13-year-old boy who was failing algebra.

"The boy's mother was clinging to me," Paris remembered. "Her snout was getting on my uniform. I had to get out of there."

So he sat down in his car and cried. A man knocked on the window and asked if he was okay.

"I was never so ashamed," Paris said. "I felt like such a coward."

But he worked up the



ALEXANDRA PAIS/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Clarke Paris, a sergeant in the Las Vegas Police Department, talks during "The Pain Behind the Badge" seminar yesterday at Middlesex County College in Edison. The program is designed to help police officers deal with job stress.

courage to finally speak with his wife about it.

"I said, 'I think this job is getting to me,'" Paris remembered.

Tracie Paris encouraged the cops in the audience to open up to their spouses.

"We need to know. We want to know," she said. "Please don't shut us out."

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