

THE SWITCH

# From arborist to policeman

A switch from council worker to cop was successful for Senior Constable Nathan Ratcliffe.

When Ratcliffe realised school wasn't his thing, he sought a career that would get him out in the open.

"I sourced an apprenticeship as a gardener... moving around different councils in [Melbourne's] western suburbs," he says. Ratcliffe soon found his feet when he joined a couple of the councils' "tree crews".

"I liked working outdoors, [as well as the] cherry pickers, chainsaws and all the big machinery. Plus I could climb trees with ropes and harnesses... the highest was about 200 feet [60 metres]," he says.

Promotions landed him behind a desk, as the occupational health and safety training officer for Brimbank City Council.

"I was responsible for training 300 outdoor staff and as time went on I... did OH&S for the whole council, about 900 staff in peak season," he says. His new role required him to head inside – and back to school.

"I went from overalls to wearing a suit and tie. I also went to university to do a graduate certificate in occupational health and safety management," he says.

After almost 10 years at the council, Ratcliffe was ready for a new challenge. He didn't need to search far.

"My father was a police officer for 32 years, [so] I'd grown up around police," he says.

"Dad always said, 'Don't join [the police force] at 18; get some life skills [first]'. I went to a graduation of a friend and when I left, I said, 'I'm joining'. Within 12 months I was in."

After 20 weeks of academy

training, the new police constable began a series of postings around the western suburbs of Melbourne.

In the past seven years, he has worked with the arson squad and various crime investigation units, before he landed his latest role in highway patrol, where he targets speeding drivers and tries to keep the roads safe.

"I really enjoy the fact that you work by yourself, so you have to be highly motivated and super careful," he says.

Although Ratcliffe is concerned hoon driving is increasing, he says distracted drivers are another problem on the roads.

He comes across plenty of challenging moments at work. "People have a crack at you but I treat people the way I expect to be treated. You get aggressive people but they're just deflecting [the fact] that they've been caught," he says.

Senior Constable Ratcliffe now appears on Channel Seven's *Highway Patrol* every Wednesday night.

Despite the shift work, he finds the hours of policing (10-hour shifts, four days a week) conducive to family life.

"I start at 6am [until 4pm] or 2pm till midnight – it gives me flexibility to be with my family. [I get] six days off a fortnight, so I'm home more than [I was] at council," he says.

When he does clock on, he's happy to be there.

"I well and truly love my job. You're at the sharp end. You don't know what you'll come across [but] nine out of 10 times you're helping people," he says.

SUE WHITE

Watch Nathan Ratcliffe at work on *Highway Patrol*, Wednesdays, 7.30pm on Seven.



THEN

NOW

**SALARY** \$70,000, including a car and entitlements.

**WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

"Really good. I worked a nine-day fortnight and was home most nights."

**HOURS** 7am-3pm, Monday to Friday (nine days a fortnight).

**SALARY** Senior constable with seven years' experience: \$66,000.

New recruits start on \$38,000 for 13 weeks, then move to \$52,000. "I didn't join Victoria Police for the money, it was for the job."

**WORK-LIFE BALANCE** "At the moment, it's fantastic. I work 10-hour shifts, four days a week."

**HOURS** 40 hours a week.  
**MISS** "The friendships I made over the years. But I got to a point where I needed new challenges. Joining the police force has given me that."

**CHALLENGES** "To be successful you have to keep bettering yourself. That's the key. You have to keep taking opportunities and keep learning."

**LINKS**

[policecareer.vic.gov.au](http://policecareer.vic.gov.au)  
[www.police.nsw.gov.au/recruitment](http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/recruitment)

**MyCareer**.com.au

For salary advice, see [mycareer.com.au/salary-centre](http://mycareer.com.au/salary-centre).



New leaf... Nathan Ratcliffe in the thicket of it as an arborist (above) and in his new role as a policeman (top). Photo: Rodger Cummins