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Photo of Officer Giving Boots to Barefoot Man Warms Hearts Online

By J. DAVID GOODMAN

On a cold November night in Times Square, Officer Lawrence DePrimo was working a counterterrorism post when he encountered an older, barefooted homeless man. The officer disappeared for a moment, then returned with a new pair of boots, and knelt to help the man put them on.

The act of kindness would have gone unnoticed and mostly forgotten, had it not been for a tourist from Arizona.

Her snapshot — taken with her cellphone on Nov. 14 and posted to the [New York Police Department's official Facebook page](#) late Tuesday — has made Officer DePrimo an overnight Internet hero.

By Wednesday evening, [the post](#) had been viewed 1.6 million times, and had attracted nearly 275,000 “likes” and more than 16,000 comments — a runaway hit for a Police Department that waded warily onto the social media platform this summer with mostly canned photos of gun seizures, award ceremonies and the police commissioner.

Among all of those posts, the blurry image of Officer DePrimo kneeling to help the shoeless man as he sat on 42nd Street stood out. “This is definitely the most viral,” said Barbara Chen, a spokeswoman for the department who helps manage its Facebook page.

Thousands of people commented on Facebook and [Reddit](#), which linked to the post on Wednesday. Most of them praised Officer DePrimo, yet some suspected that the photograph had been staged. Many debated whether the officer's actions were representative of police officers in general, or were just unusually exceptional.

“I still have a grudge against law enforcement everywhere,” wrote one commenter on the police Facebook page. “But my respects to that fine officer.”

Officer DePrimo, 25, who joined the department in 2010 and lives with his parents on Long Island, was shocked at the attention. He was not warned before the photo went online; the department had not learned which officer was in the picture until hours later.

The officer, normally assigned to the Sixth Precinct in the West Village, readily recalled the encounter. “It was freezing out and you could see the blisters on the man’s feet,” he said in an interview. “I had two pairs of socks and I was still cold.” They started talking; he found out the man’s shoe size: 12.

As the man walked slowly down Seventh Avenue on his heels, Officer DePrimo went into a Skechers shoe store at about 9:30 p.m. “We were just kind of shocked,” said Jose Cano, 28, a manager working at the store that night. “Most of us are New Yorkers and we just kind of pass by that kind of thing. Especially in this neighborhood.”

Mr. Cano volunteered to give the officer his employee discount to bring down the regular \$100 price of the all-weather boots to a little more than \$75. The officer has kept the receipt in his vest since then, he said, “to remind me that sometimes people have it worse.”

The photo was taken by Jennifer Foster, a civilian communications director for the [Pinal County Sheriff’s Office](#) in Arizona. She said the moment resonated for personal reasons: She remembered as a young girl seeing her father, a 32-year veteran of the Phoenix police force, buy food for a homeless man.

“He squatted down, just like this officer,” she said.

After returning from vacation, she described the picture in an e-mail to the New York Police Department, thinking of it as a sort of a compliment card. She never expected the picture to end up online — “I’m not on Facebook,” she said — but a department official e-mailed her and asked if she would send along the photo so it could be posted.

As for the man he helped, Officer DePrimo never got his name, and he could not be immediately located on Wednesday. “He was the most polite gentleman I had met,” the officer said, adding that the man’s face lit up at the sight of the boots. Officer DePrimo offered him a cup of coffee, but “as soon as the boots were on him, he went on his way, and I just went back to my post.”

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