



Mindful Conversations: Historical Trauma, Policing, and Cultural Competence

By **Sharlene Graham Boltz, JD**, Professor of Law, Salmon P. Chase College of Law, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, Kentucky

Recent events in Baltimore, Maryland, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, have revealed festering wounds that serve to thwart effective policing in the United States. These wounds persist as a consequence of a collective absence of courage to confront difficult issues with mindful, intentional reflection and self-examination of those systems that exacerbate the historical traumas experienced by our inner-city communities. The protests on the streets are an expression of frustration and outrage by citizens who are historically traumatized by systems they are powerless to alter. And yet, as tensions mount, the time to consider alternative approaches to address the concerns of traumatized citizens and frustrated law enforcement is urgent. Time is up!

Mark Wynn, former Nashville, Tennessee, police lieutenant and nationally recognized expert stated, "When you train someone to be a cop, anyone in this country, you train them to challenge when confronted. You train them to interrogate when suspicious. You train them to [use] fighting skills that no one else has. You train them how to use weapons. You train them how to deal with conflict. You teach them all these skills, and then you add all of that to someone who is violent, you've got a lethal combination on your hands..."¹ While these comments were provided in the context of domestic abuse, those statements are no less true when the issue involves perceptions

of misuse, if not the realities of abuse, of power by a law enforcement officer. If the stated goal is to provide a community with effective policing by law enforcement, then such policing must be provided with a deep understanding of historical trauma and a deliberate infusion of cultural competence. The answer requires a commitment to engage in systemic, moderated, and mindful trauma-informed conversations that examine historical traumas, policing agendas, and the cultural competencies desperately needed to address persistent tensions. No quick fixes will suffice. No limited series of public town hall meetings, which merely provide a forum for all sides to give voice to grievances, will serve the purpose of peaceful and purposeful informed policing of diverse communities.

Mindful conversations of the issues expressed by these protests can be painful. The conversations will expose bias and prejudice, both implicit and explicit, which are uncomfortable and painful to witness. And yet, as anyone who has experienced the process necessary to clean a wound so that healing can occur will attest, pain and discomfort is unavoidable and necessary.

Three collaborative models of restorative justice are worthy of consideration when designing a structured process of mindful conversations. The first program to consider is the Peacemaking Program of the Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation, which seeks to establish a transformative process

of healing from conflict. A component of the Peacemaking Program, particularly relevant to current tensions experienced between law enforcement and communities, is the Life Value Engagements Program. Life Value Engagements consist of a designated instructor who guides an individual or a group through a deliberative process of problem solving. The Life Value Engagements Program requires personal accountability and a willingness by the participants to grapple with sensitive issues through dynamic dialogues through the lens of stories and teaching, thus allowing for levels of self-realization to emerge.²

A second model to consider is based on the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions created in the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa. Truth Commissions are utilized internationally by countries emerging from severe social conflict. These commissions operate on the principle assumption that the investigative process itself and resulting historical narratives will lead to justice and reconciliation. Admittedly, Truth Commissions have received mixed reviews for their effectiveness.³ However, the structure and other lessons learned by their creation that can contribute to the restoration of faith and trust in law enforcement are noteworthy.

Final consideration should be given to the work of Lee Mun Wah and *The Art of Mindful Facilitation*.⁴ The practice of mindful facilitation seeks to stimulate authentic dialogues on race, gender, and sexism issues that can plague an institution. The mindfully facilitated conversation structure is informative and would support the goal to improve the relationship between law enforcement and the public, develop cultural competencies, and provide effective community policing.

This mindful conversation should be moderated by individuals trained in mindful engagement of difficult conversations and educated in the concerns of law enforcement and the citizenry. Those dialogues should be conducted internally within police departments and state-wide law enforcement agencies, as well as externally with the citizens directly impacted by historical trauma. Some of the issues raised will not be novel



and will involve complex, intersecting issues of class, race, and ethnicity, as well as historical policing practices that have contributed to the traumatization of the community at issue. However, systemic change demands that participants roll up their collective sleeves, be brave and committed, and get to work.

The cost of systemic engagement in mindful conversations does not exceed the amounts paid to citizens who have experienced excessive policing that reveals the absence of cultural competence and an understanding of historical traumas. The cost of moderated, mindful conversations is an investment in effective community-policing

strategies that engage the concerns of all constituencies. The trauma experience caused by the death of a human being on our city streets merits the greatest scrutiny by all professionals who answer the call to serve. ❖

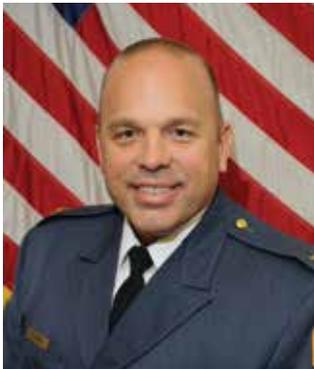
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¹Mark Wynn (police lieutenant (ret.)), Nashville, TN, Police Department), interview by FRONTLINE, "How to Combat Officer-Involved Domestic Violence," November 23, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/criminal-justice/death-in-st-augustine/how-to-combat-officer-involved-domestic-violence> (accessed July 27, 2015).

²Peacemaking Program of the Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation, *Plan of Operations*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.navajocourts.org/Peacemaking/Plan/PPPO2013-2-25.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2015).

³Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch, Megan Mackenzie, and Mohamed Sesay, "Measuring the Impacts of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Placing the Global 'Success' of TRCs in Local Perspective," *Cooperation and Conflict* 47, no. 3 (September 2012): 386–403.

⁴Lee Mun Wah, *The Art of Mindful Facilitation* (Los Angeles, CA: StirFry Seminars and Consulting, 2004).



Safe Summer Nights: Community Engagement—One Hotdog at a Time

By **Todd Axtell**, Assistant Chief, Saint Paul, Minnesota, Police Department

Law enforcement agencies understand that community engagement builds trust and reduces criminal activity within the communities we serve. What we, as law enforcement professionals, sometimes forget is that we do not have to go about this important task of engaging with the community by ourselves. It is okay to accept help and guidance from our community partners. In Saint Paul, Minnesota, we learned that we needed our community partners to do it right.

During the spring of 2014, Tom Campion, a Saint Paul resident and owner of Superb Meats, contacted me with an idea. Over breakfast, Mr. Campion offered to recruit some local business owners and community leaders to join him in serving food in the most challenged areas of Saint Paul. He wanted to bring the Saint Paul community together in a way that had not been done before. Mr. Campion offered to donate, prepare, and serve hotdogs and hamburgers for the community in cooperation with the Saint Paul Police Department.

The goal was that the community would not just come out to eat a free meal, but get to know their neighbors and, even more importantly, their neighborhood police officers. A simple plan for a hotdog and hamburger cookout snowballed into a 13-week program throughout Saint

Paul called Safe Summer Nights. This program ultimately evolved into a large joint cooperative operation between the Saint Paul Police Department and other neighborhood businesses. Mr. Campion drew overwhelming support from local restaurateurs and businesses, in addition to other anonymous donors and dozens of volunteers. The dedicated group of volunteers and organizers contributed food, beverages, and treats, along with their valuable personal time. Together, they served more than 10,000 meals at recreation centers and parks throughout Saint Paul during the summer of 2014.

These Safe Summer Nights events attracted thousands of attendees and enabled our officers and residents to become acquainted over a meal, rather than during times of trouble. Specialty units—including SWAT, ODU, Motors, K9, and Mounted—and street officers attended the events. The program was a big hit with the kids and our community at large. Saint Paul Parks and Recreation provided a climbing wall and bounce gym, and officers gave out "Junior Crime-Fighter" stickers and baseball cards to the youngsters. While parents chatted with officers, their kids enjoyed time visiting with our canines and horses and sitting on our police motorcycles. One of our more creative officers

volunteered to be a face-painter. The connections we made with the community at these 13 events over the summer were priceless.

Aside from building community relationships, Safe Summer Nights had a remarkable effect on crime as well. During the evenings when these events occurred, crime was non-existent in those neighborhoods and overall crime dropped over 6 percent in Saint Paul (2014 vs. 2013). We understand that there is no specific community outreach event that will reduce crime on its own, but we have no doubt that Safe Summer Nights greatly contributed to the community's livability and sense of safety during those events.

Mr. Campion's dedication to and stewardship of Safe Summer Nights events connected our community to police in a way that we had not observed before in Saint Paul, Minnesota. This created lasting bonds of cooperation and improved trust and understanding.

The Safe Summer Nights program was so successful that it is continuing in an even bigger way this year (2015). The program has been recognized in the media and received many awards from the American Red Cross and other accredited organizations. ❖