

Mike Chitwood—A Profile in Law Enforcement Leadership

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Hello, and welcome to *The Beat*. I'm Jennifer Donelan, your host. Today's interview is being hosted via Zoom. Today we have such a special guest. I am so excited about this podcast. So, let me introduce you to Sheriff Chitwood. When most people think of Florida's Daytona Beach, they think of spring break and fast cars at the Daytona International Speedway, but for many in law enforcement, they think of the sheriff of Volusia County, Mike Chitwood. Sheriff Chitwood began his career with the Philadelphia Police Department in 1988, where he developed a reputation for being a hard-charging cop, chasing suspects on subway tracks through ductwork and down city blocks. In 2005, he moved on to become the chief in Shawnee, Oklahoma, a city of 29,000 people. A year later, he became the chief of Daytona Beach, where he served for 10 years before being elected sheriff of Volusia County, which encompasses Daytona Beach.

When this former Philly cop arrived in Daytona with a commitment to reduce the use of force by officers, increase transparency, and work towards reform, it did not seem like an easy fit to some people, yet he has established a cult following that spans the political divide and a small contingent that sees things quite differently. Sheriff Chitwood, welcome to *The Beat*. It's an honor.

Sheriff Mike Chitwood

01:35

It's an honor. Thank you for that wonderful introduction.

Donelan

01:37

Absolutely. You've earned it. You've earned it. So, before we get too far into our discussion, can we go back to the beginning? What attracted you to a career in law enforcement?

Chitwood

01:48

Yeah. I am a second-generation police officer. My dad retired after 55 years in policing in 2019. He began his career in Philadelphia, went on to be a police chief in a small township outside of Philly after spending 20 years in Philly, he then went there for four years, and then he was in Portland, Maine, as a

chief for almost 20 years before he headed back to Pennsylvania and became the superintendent of the Upper Darby Police Department for 15 years. So, I have no other knowledge of my father other than being a cop.

Donelan

02:19

No doubt. Was that—this is what I'm going to do, because, you know, sometimes kids with parents... Like my mom was a science teacher and I couldn't stand science. Was it just something you naturally were inclined to, or was it an expectation?

Chitwood

02:33

No expectation. As a kid, my father was my hero. When I became a teenager, much like your mom with science, my father and policing—as a teenager I was the antichrist. I just did not want anything to do with cops. I didn't want anything to do with police work, quite frankly, didn't really understand what law enforcement was all about. I knew I just didn't like it. And then, you know, I got married young; I had a couple daughters. You're 21 years old. You're working on the docks. And you're like, "There's got to be more to life than this." And 23, I got hired by the Philadelphia Police Department. And the day I walked through the doors of that police academy I knew there was nothing more I wanted to do with my life than be in law enforcement.

Donelan

03:11

Those are the moments that people pray for, you know. It's like, "Have I made the right decision? Have I not?" But when you have that kind of moment and you know you've arrived, that's phenomenal and very lucky—very lucky. So, let's stick with the early part of your career. Do you remember your first duty station?

Chitwood

03:28

My first duty station was to walk a beat in the subway. And, you know, you had a huge homeless population back in the late 80s—AIDS was coming on the scene, hepatitis was coming on the scene, homelessness—so you're really walking a beat in the subway. You got to meet all kinds of people and you really had to learn how to interact to survive. You really had to think on your feet, because a lot of the problems that came your way, they weren't something you could just read into a manual and then just figure out: How do I deal with somebody who's mentally ill who is acting out in the subway? How do I get them the help that they need? Slapping the handcuffs on them wasn't exactly the way to proceed.

And then after about six months, I did such a good job that I got my first promotion. They moved me 32 steps up from the subway to street level. So, you could walk a foot beat in the fresh air and the sunshine. So—

Donelan

04:16

Which smells better.

Chitwood

04:17

It smells a lot better. Absolutely. But one of the things with walking a beat, it gives you a different perspective than when you're in a car. I mean, that's why I truly believe you've got to get out of the car. I mean, you know, you're stopping into businesses, you're meeting people, people are stopping asking you for directions, you're helping people who lock their keys in their car. So really you get to learn policing from the ground up and how to interact with people from all different walks of life who have all different kinds of problems and see you walking down the street and they want you to be a problem solver.

Donelan

04:49

You took the words out of my mouth. Because when you talked about the fact that you start walking the subway beat and then you're moved to the streets above, walking the beat, you know, we have all of these discussions and debates over policing in America right now, but that seems to be just such a fundamental activity, right—that one-on-one contact, person-to-person, human contact. You're out of the car, that barrier's gone. How much of an answer do you think that is to some of the issues we're currently seeing?

Chitwood

05:19

It's a big issue because I'm a huge proponent of technology, but the downside of technology is patrol cars today are loaded with so much technology it becomes the officer's office. So there really is no reason for them to get out of the car, because they can do everything they need to do inside of the vehicle. Their paperwork's done; you could write tickets in there; you could do your research. So, really, you're only getting out of the car to provide a service and then you get back in the car and you're off to the next call. And I think that, you know, back when I started in Philadelphia, there were 7,000 cops. So, you had cops that were out on biking, on foot. That was their assignments.

And I'll take it a step further, you know, while I didn't have school resource officers in school, I know that school resource officers played a huge role in the public-school system. Because those men and women, by day, they were school resource officers, but once school got out, they were the coaches, they were running homework clubs. So, they were in that school all day long because when they got off the clock at 3:00 or 3:30, they then became school board employees. It was their part-time job working for the school board and the kids got to see them not only in uniform; they got to see them as their coach, their strength and conditioning coach, you know, running the homework club or whatever, maybe running band. Those officers were picked for a certain skillset that matched a certain school. And I always wanted to do that.

Donelan

06:44

That's amazing. That's the type of investment, right, that you may not see the obvious payoff right there and then, but again, it's just going back to some of the fundamentals, which, that balance between, you know, how we've modernized in some of the tried-and-true things that actually, really do work. I want to talk about balancing now. So, in law enforcement circles, you have been viewed as somewhat of a unicorn. You're a northern cop leading an agency in the deep south. You appeal to those who are tough on crime orientation, as well as those who are reform minded. You're known as both a visionary thinker on law enforcement issues, and someone whose philosophy is often presented as straight, no chaser. And you must be—and I don't know if this is a fact or not—but you must be the only sheriff that I've ever known to be endorsed by both the NRA and the NAACP. So, what's the secret sauce here? What is it about your approach to the job that enables you to walk that tight rope?

Chitwood

07:41

I don't know, to be honest with you. But in 2016, my first time I ran for office, I did receive the endorsement of the NAACP and the NRA. You know, I think we focus too much in American society on what separates us as opposed to what really unites us. And everybody, no matter what your socioeconomic income is, or what the color of your skin is—you want law enforcement. You want it to be honest. You want it to be fair. And you want it to solve problems. And we all want that. And that's, I think, what the building blocks of policing need to remain focused on.

How do I provide a level of service that the neighborhoods want? Because every neighborhood's different. In one neighborhood, it's drug dealing. In another neighborhood, it's speeding. In another neighborhood, it might be, what are we doing to engage juveniles who don't have anything to do? And let's face it, in many American communities, the only government resource they see is that patrol car. They don't know who their local elected officials are. They don't know who their state officials are. They don't know who their federal officials are. The only government resource is us. And a lot of times when they see us, it's not in a good light because we're arresting somebody or we're giving somebody a ticket. We're doing things that aren't really popular.

Donelan

08:55

It's that moment. It's that crisis moment, or something bad has happened and it's really difficult to find those opportunities to have those connections when there's no crisis. The other piece that you were talking about, the whole ability to just not do a blanket approach across everything, right? Like you said, one neighborhood may be facing this issue, another neighborhood is facing this. How are you able to lead your department in a way so that you're able to address those different things all at once? Is there a certain philosophy you maintain, or a program that you've enacted? How do you do that?

Chitwood

09:28

We try to be as transparent as transparent can be with everything that we do. And you know you're going to be criticized because you're being transparent; you're not hiding anything. You have to learn from that criticism, but you want to talk to the community. I mean, I want all of my captains, including myself, to attend community meetings. Give out your business card, make sure you're answering your emails promptly because we may look at crime stats in a certain neighborhood, and say, "Oh, this is what the issue is, and this is how we're going to go out and police this neighborhood." Well, the neighborhood doesn't see the same problem that I see. Their problem is something else that they want us to be doing, and that's where we have to tailor our approach to what's important.

We just did a crime presentation the other night. Our largest city, Deltona, is a little over 100,000 people. We're the police department for the city, and we go in there and we're showing a four-year, 30-percent reduction in crime, our clearance rate. The ability to solve a crime once it occurs is at 50 percent. So, 50 percent of the time, which way surpasses the national average that a part one crime—a burglary, a homicide, a stolen car, a larceny car break, robbery—we're solving them. But when we do the presentation, we get a nice little smattering of applause, and first question out of box: What are you doing with speeding on Deltona Boulevard? What are you doing with—

Donelan

10:41

You're like, what? I just drop crime 40 percent and you're worried about speeding on Deltona Boulevard?

Chitwood

10:46

Right. But overwhelmingly in the community that's what they ask: How many tickets are you running? Because it's important to them because there's a school nearby; there's a playground nearby. "Hey, it's really great that we're not having drug deals going on there, but what are we doing with the speeding?"

Donelan

11:02

Quality of life.

Chitwood

11:03

That's important to them. So we turn around and say, "Look, we still have to continue fighting crime, but now what we need to do is we need to be able to do a much, much better job at traffic enforcement, advertising that traffic enforcement, and advertising what the results are." I don't care if we write 4,000 warnings. I don't care if we don't write any tickets and we do 4,000 warnings, and then we do 4,000 they're all educational car stops. That's what we're going to broadcast out there. That we made 4,000 stops and we educated every single person and we didn't have to write a ticket and that's a win-win.

Donelan

11:34

I'm going to go a little off script here and ask you something, because I'm meeting you for the first time. And one of the things that's really affecting me right now is how human you seem. Because, quite frankly, just talking to you now for, what, two minutes? Three minutes? I could see how you've been able to cross the aisle and how you've been able to... Because it seems like you just, and plainly put, keep it real. Is that something that you try to do?

Chitwood

11:55

I think it's my personality. I am a frustrated former athlete. I grew up in a very, very diverse city. And as a kid, I remember I could get on my bike and bike into a Black neighborhood, a Hispanic neighborhood, a Jewish neighborhood, an Irish neighborhood, an Italian neighborhood, and go out and play ball and then get on the bike and leave. Never had an issue. Never. Because you were going in there to play basketball or baseball or football with different folks from different neighborhoods and different socioeconomic backgrounds, and on that court we were all the same. You were there to play. You were there to win. I think that that gave me, personally, a grounding in interacting with people from all different backgrounds through sports. That's what I think.

Donelan

12:38

So how do you teach that?

Chitwood

12:39

It's difficult, because one of the things we look at is... I tend to never want to hire somebody that's 19 years old. It's a disaster for that young person; odds are they going to fail. And they may have been good at this career maybe a little later on when they got some exposure to different things. But when I talk to kids about education—I just taught the civics class to middle schoolers on Monday—I talked about the importance of education. You know, you grew up in Port Orange, Florida, which is 90 percent White city. You went to Port Orange Elementary School (90 percent White), middle school (90 percent White). You went to high school; maybe that number drops to 65 percent, 70 percent because obviously the high schools are more feeders for different parts of the city.

So, you've really grown up in this one area your whole entire life and you have one paradigm. That's why you need to go to college, is what I told these kids at civics class. You need to get out of here. And I don't mean that in a bad way. You need to get out and see what the rest of the world is like, because people don't all live the same way. They don't all live in single homes with swimming pools in the back. Where I come from, you're on top of one another and you have people from all different parts of the world living on some blocks. You have people from Pakistan and you have Muslims living on a block; you have Jewish people living on a block, you have Blacks, Whites, Irish, Hispanic—all in that one grow home block, all trying to make a living and support their families and educate their children.

And I think that's what we need more of in law enforcement, is to understand that view and when we don't have that view. That warrior mentality is the old way of doing things and, believe it or not, you've got to fight against it every day. I have to fight against it here, still. We're warriors and we are here to combat crime head on and we have to, you know, I think former President Trump used the term, "Don't be too nice." You know, what message did he send very early on to law enforcement? "Don't be too nice." What does that mean?

Donelan

14:36

Right. You're here to help people. Police officers have to wear so many different hats because they are the only point of government contact for some. And so, they're counselor, they're doctor, they're the police officer, they're everything to many people. It is a heavy weight to carry. And the age thing that you just brought up is actually the first time that I've kind of heard someone say that out loud, but I think you made a great point—looking at just sort of level of maturity and, "Are you ready for this?" Because it's very real and the implications, as we have seen, are very real. When you were chief in Daytona Beach, it became one of, if not the first, department in Florida, I believe, to require the use of body-worn cameras at a time when the technology was new and I'm assuming there was a lot of pushback internally from officers and unions. And you also implemented some tactics and policies that would reduce use of force by officers. How did that go?

Chitwood

15:33

Yes. That is a tremendous question. And thanks for the opportunity to answer. We were the first police department in the state of Florida to go full body cameras. We started experimenting probably in 2011 or 2012 with them, and the impetus behind that was complaints from the minority community about the way they were being treated. Number one complaint was rudeness, not taking the time to have a little bit of empathy. And then it was followed with, you know, traffic stops. And so we decided to... Let's experiment with these things, and let's put them on our most aggressive officers, and let's put them on the officers who have the most complaints. Now, we didn't say that out loud because the union was—

Donelan

16:14

I was going to say.

Chitwood

16:15

The union kind of understood where we were going, but it was a pilot program. And one of the interesting things that came out of it was I had an officer that made a lot of narcotics arrests, a lot of narcotics arrests. Once that body camera went on, he didn't make any more narcotics arrests. And then we went back and looked at what was transpiring with these arrests. And most of the arrests were never making it past the preliminary hearing stage. So, it kind of weeded some people out. The good cops, the cops that were out making arrests and answering a lot of radio calls, they didn't change. They continued

doing their job; and as a matter of fact, they actually liked it because their efforts were being documented, not only for complaint issues, but for court issues. They knew that that was going to back up their report, that will back up their investigation because now you can look at the body-camera footage and see exactly what I did, and exactly what I said.

Donelan

17:14

Did your lawsuits come down?

Chitwood

17:16

Our lawsuits dropped dramatically, and our complaints against police dropped into the single digits.

Donelan

17:22

Really?

Chitwood

17:22

Because somebody would make a complaint, and we would say, "Listen, before you fill out the form, please come in and look at the body-camera footage first." And we were very transparent with that. So, if you made a complaint you could see it. The NAACP would call me and say, "Hey, we got a complaint." I'm like, "Listen, tell me what time works for you. I'll bring you into a big room, and I'll play the body-camera footage. Take a look at it, and feel free to ask any question that you want." And I think that transparency and that availability that they knew, all they need to do was go and say, "Hey, a group of us want to come over and take a look at this arrest; a group of us want to come over and look at this or that, or discuss, maybe there's a better way to do this even though the body camera shows that everything that we did, you guys did, was by policy, maybe there's a softer, better way that we could accomplish the same mission."

So that's what... We got so much buy-in with the body cameras. It was a no-brainer, and then eventually I even moved it on the SWAT team. That didn't go over too well. That was kind of like pulling teeth, but it's high liability, why do you not want to see what's going on? It's protecting everybody involved, especially when it comes to things like knock and announce. You lose court cases and the suppression hearings because the defense attorney says, "They didn't knock and announce. They just crashed through the door." Well, it's kind of hard to argue when the body camera's on and it shows that you knocked, announced, and waited 30 seconds before you entered the property.

Donelan

18:36

There are departments that still don't have body-worn camera programs, went through that same battle that you went through when you introduced it, when it was really new—what advice do you give to their leadership in terms of creating as smooth as possible?

Chitwood

18:50

I think that the cameras have been around long enough that you can go out and find policies and procedures that are best practices. And I would ask you to be introspective to police leaders and the government leaders. Isn't it, at the end of the day, your job to protect your employees and protect your community? While body cameras are not a panacea, they're really a good tool that can establish transparency and trust in your community, but you have to share that information. A lot of police departments, including my alma mater in Philadelphia, do not share that in a timely manner. And when you don't do that, as Winston Churchill once said, a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth gets a chance to put his pants on. So, I mean, I'll tell you an anecdotal story.

We had a police shooting, probably in 2015 I think it was, in which a guy was holding his girlfriend hostage. We got a whole bunch of 911 calls that he had a gun, he had a knife, he had a machete, and he was in the house, and he was killing her. We show up, Daytona Beach police officers show up, and they could hear the woman screaming: "Help, help, help, help, help." The decision is made to kick in the front door. When they kick in the door and enter the property, the suspect was a big guy, he was a former NFL lineman. He was about 6 foot 10, probably weighed about 350 pounds or more. He grabs his girlfriend, uses her as a human shield, and puts the knife into her chest, and then begins to start to push the knife into her chest and starts to stab her. We open fire and we wound him and take him into custody.

My phone rings. It took me 20 minutes to get to the crime scene. By the time I got there, there were several hundred people outside of the home. The mayor was outside of the house and the mayor's brother, who was a city councilman, was outside of the house. And the community was screaming that we kicked the door and shot an unarmed man. So, obviously, this thing's not going to go well if it's 3:00 in the morning and oh, we have 250 people outside of a house. We've got to do something. So, we went back, downloaded the body camera, reviewed it, brought the mayor and his brother in, put him in a room said, "Watch this as much as you want, and then come out. We've got to talk." And then after he watched it, he said, "Oh my God, they saved her life." I said, "Now, I need your help. We need to assemble the NAACP; we need to assemble community leaders. I want them to view this. The state attorney doesn't want me to release it publicly, but you know what? I got to release it. The community's got to see what happened. I cannot wait on the state attorney to tell me when I can release it. So, at noon, we held a huge press conference, we released it, by 4:00 in the afternoon, there were no more issues.

Donelan

21:11

I think that that is the beauty and saving grace of that transparency. And you keep talking about this transparency. That also flips though, right? I mean, if you have a case where something bad happened on camera. While it's painful, you've still got to rip the Band-Aid off and share that one too. I feel like it's just you share the good, the bad, and the ugly, and it builds trust.

Chitwood

21:34

Amen. You have to be... As quickly as you put out the body-camera footage on the good things, is as quickly as you got to put out the body camera on the bad things. And then you got to be ready to take the heat for it, and then you got to be ready to say, "Okay, we made a mistake. We were wrong. These are the steps that we're going to take to fix that." I think the same thing applies: "Okay, you made a mistake; you put a plan forward, and let's go forward." Now, you're going to get beat up, but that's why you take this job. Every decision isn't going to be the right decision as much as you try to.

Donelan

22:07

When, I think, your long career is proof positive that this is the way because it builds trust. The community will be more willing to forgive the bad if you're willing to, like you said, it's that time too—you can't wait days. Departments that wait days to release footage if they release it at all or release a statement or get on camera, that's the kind of hit you don't want to take. You, like you said, you, "Oh, we get beat up." You don't get beat up as bad as the ones that don't say anything. Definitely think that transparency is the big key. And we're going to talk about 2020. And I can't wait to hear your thoughts about that because that transparency really is—everybody's looking for this magic solution, and I really think that's it.

Chitwood

22:48

I mean, look at what happened in Chicago, where that young man was shot and killed on the steps and it took two years before the mayor and the police chief decided to release that. And then there was complete uproar. A police chief lost his job. I think there was civil unrest, and justifiably. Why would you wait? You knew it was a horrible shooting. You knew it was a bad shooting. Did you think it was going to go away and people were going to stop asking questions? No. And when you don't put that information out there, somebody's going to feed that void.

Donelan

23:17

Exactly. The beast is going to get fed. When the beast needs feeding, it's going to get fed whether you're doing it, or it's going somewhere else. Water always finds a way. I always say this. Alright. Oh, we talked about recruiting a little bit; you're talking about, you know, making sure that people are ready for the reality of what law enforcement is and the heavy weight that you carry, all the good that you do. You've been very vocal about the need for continuous efforts to improve law enforcement policies and practices. Last fall, you pushed to have your office take over the training of your recruits from a local community college. You were quoted by a local newspaper as saying, "We're at a point in law enforcement where determining the culture and future of an organization cannot be left in the hands of others." What drove you to that, and what did you hope to achieve?

Chitwood

24:04

We fortunately, two weeks ago, were granted the ability to now run our own police academy. We have to follow the state curriculum for 770 hours, but we can go way above and beyond that and we could mix and match things in with the framework like implicit bias training, race and police, de-escalation, current events, you know, we could put all kind of different things into that skeleton, that framework that they give us. I think when you look at what happened over the summer and you look back historically, there are two kinds of policing academies in this country. One is open, which we have here in Florida, meaning anybody regardless of your background, if you can pay the tuition, you can go to the police academy and graduate. Might not get hired—probably aren't going to get hired—but as long as you spend that \$3,500 or \$3,800, you're in the academy. And every step along the way, the state academies get reimbursed monies while you're in there, even though you're never going to get hired. So, an example is, your first day of class they get a \$1,000 per student in the first day of class. You pass the state exam, they might get \$2,000 per student. If they get hired, they'll get \$3,000 reimbursement to the state college.

So, for the state college, for an open enrollment, they make money at every turn. Conversely, a closed academy which we are going to start running, we screen every single applicant—psychological, polygraph exam, drug screening, in-depth background—and then we offer you employment. And from the day you walk through the door, you are a Volusia Sheriff's Office recruit, trained by us, trained in our policies, trained in our procedure, trained in our culture. The first line in our use of force policy is the sanctity of human life is paramount in all of our decision making.

When you're in an academy or being taught generally to pass an exam, I have no influence in the culture. When they get out of that academy, then I hire them, then I have to put them through another academy, and try to break some of the things that they may have learned or heard—

Donelan

26:12

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Chitwood

26:12

—separate. You only have one chance to train somebody correctly. And I'm interested in building careers, having people here for the long haul are going to serve this community for 20, 25, 30 years, and the best way to help me with recruiting is just that. The first day you get hired here, pay you \$14 an hour, and you get full medical benefits, and you're in the pension system. After you graduate from the academy, it goes up to \$16 an hour. After you get out of field training, it goes up to \$20 an hour. So, there's all benchmarks for you to come in and prove. And during this time, you're under scrutiny of my staff and myself every day. We're going to know if you're going to make it and fit in. So, I think that any police department that has the wherewithal to do it should train their own. What I was saying earlier was when you go back and look at the—I don't even want to call him a police officer—the guy in

Minnesota, and you look at some of these other incidents, most of these officers that are involved in these nationwide incidents of excessive force, brutality, you know, moral turpitude issues, have gone through an open academy.

Donelan

27:18

Interesting. Now, I will say this too. When I look at recent cases in my area, and honestly, in several areas, the law—personnel laws protect you from looking at some of this stuff—but when you do start to get a hint and glimpse of background, sometimes I'm left scratching my head saying, "How did this person get in?" So you're on the cusp of launching your own program, and I'm not sure if you're there yet, since you just found out two weeks ago, but like, how do you ensure that your psychological testing and all of that is the best it can be? What thoughts have you had on that?

Chitwood

27:53

Great question. Some of it is a crap shoot. You know, you always try to find the best practices that are going on around the country and implement them into your organization. And it's funny, as we're talking now, I just met with eight recruits who are police officers in other parts of the country that have applied to come to work for us. So, they had all done their psychological exams and everybody, psychological, none of us are perfect. You're gambling on a human being, because I don't have an X-ray machine that can look into your soul and say, "I'm disqualifying." Some of them it's blatant; some of them you look in there and they tell, you know, they were not truthful during a psychological exam; they weren't truthful during a polygraph exam. There are other ones where, you know, the psychological will say that the person is well adjusted—they have good communication skills; they're very mature. However, when confronted with a high-stress event, can't guarantee that they'll be able to perform up to the level. So, do you disqualify that person? Because there are a lot of people who take that psychological exam that some of those profiles aren't 100 percent perfect.

Donelan

28:59

Right.

Chitwood

28:59

Some people you have to gamble and because you look and say, "Okay, they've been a cop for five years somewhere else and all of their evaluations are glowing. They have no citizens' complaints against them. They have no excessive force complaints." So, you know, you're going to gamble on that. You hold your breath. We're hiring from the human race.

Donelan

29:16

Yeah, exactly. And everybody's human, and we all come with our own garbage. That's for sure. I think that honesty tends to be a glowing thing to look at. You've got somebody who's dishonest, you're losing out the gate. You know, it keeps going back for me and I want to ask you about your trip to Scotland. But just about being a human being, understanding people have faults, but really just relying on some on the old adages that the truth will set you free, you know, it's truth, it's transparency, it's timely. It's just doing the right thing. And it just sounds so simplistic and we could have conferences for weeks on end, but at the end of the day, if it boils down to that, why are we having such a tough time sticking to that?

Chitwood

29:54

Yeah, you're right. What is worse? The mistake or the lie covering up the mistake? And it's always the lie covering up the mistake.

Donelan

30:01

It's always the lie covering up the mistake.

Chitwood

30:02

It's always. It's always. And part of that comes down to the unions. I cannot tell you the number of times that... And I'll give you an example. A deputy recently accidentally discharges his weapon inside of a car with a bunch of other deputies who were doing a take down and it's caught on body-camera footage. The easiest thing in the world is to come in and say, "Sheriff, I don't know what I was thinking. I had my gun out of my holster. I banged my arm on the door. The gun went off. Thank God I didn't kill one of my fellow officers. What do I need to do to fix this?"

Donelan

30:36

Correct. That would be the right thing to do.

Chitwood

30:38

It would be the right thing to do. And it would take a five-minute conversation.

Donelan

30:41

Correct.

Chitwood

30:41

Okay. Here's what I need to do. We're going to retrain you. Obviously, you're going to have to think about this. We're going to suspend you for a little bit, but you're going to recover from this and move on. Thank you for your honesty. Instead I have—the union comes in, I have to do an internal investigation. We have to cut down a forest full of trees to do this 120-page report. We have to listen to this “Mary had a little lamb” story and then after everything was said and done, the deputy says, “Sheriff, I screwed up.” Why did I have to wait three months for you to hear that? You should have been in my office the next day [inaudible] “I screwed up. I could have killed myself. I could have killed some fellow officer in the car. I don't know what I was thinking. What do we need to do to fix this?” And the deputy's a good deputy. He does a good job. But I just sit there and shake your head, “Why?” The union wraps up this thing, “Well, you can't go in there and say that.” Well, why not? Why? Why not?

Donelan

31:29

Right. I agree. I agree. I absolutely agree. And this may be the deep dive that we've got to start to make instead of some of the other things that are on the table right now that may not even make a scratch. But some of what you're talking about could really have a really lasting impact. 2015—you go to Scotland to study techniques for handling people exhibiting aggressive behavior or signs of mental illness. After that visit you came back, you launched a pilot—I'm not surprised—you launched a pilot project that paired deputies with social workers and mental health counselors—really hot-button issue right now, really relevant. Can you tell us more about that? What that looks like?

Chitwood

32:06

Yeah. The mental health counselors came in a little later, but in 2015, I was fortunate enough to go with Police Executive Research Forum, which is a national think tank out of Washington D.C. dealing with police issues. I was one of 25 police executives that was selected to travel to Scotland to study with Police Scotland or National Police Force on how does a police force that does not carry firearms—how do they deal with mentally ill, mentally disturbed folks? Or violent individuals armed with knives, bats, petrol bombs, bricks, and people don't end up dead. In America, they end up dead.

Donelan

32:40

Good idea. Right place to go.

Chitwood

32:40

Okay, let's go. And there was no sightseeing, but they were 12-hour days watching how they trained, watching what their policies and procedures were, watching how they recruited, watching CCTV footage—because everything over there in Europe especially, there's CCTV footage all over the place. And what we took away from that and actually developed it, it's called ICAT training: Integrated

Communication and Tactics. And the focal point of it is time, distance, and cover are your friend. Obviously, you have an active shooter in the school, that's not going to work. But you have a mentally ill person, or somebody who's high on drugs is inside of a house with a gun threatening to kill everybody and kill themselves, and we get there and we kick the front door in and shoot and kill him. Well, why? He's inside of the home right now. Why not use time, distance, and cover? Find out as much information as you can about him. Does he have a mental health counselor? Does he have somebody we could talk to? Why are we going to force his hand and go in there and have to kill him? And that's what was born out of that. And now as we're moving along with de-escalation training and I can tell you that our use of force dropped by 50 percent.

We put the whole department through training. We did a study in 2017. In 2018, we trained the entire department on this ICAT—Integrated Communication and Tactics—scenario-based training, time, distance, and cover, sanctity of human life, get more less-lethal weaponry out on the street, being able to reach out to mental health counselors. Our use of force dropped by 50 percent—

Donelan

34:17

I was going to ask.

Chitwood

34:17

Dropped by 50 percent.

Donelan

34:18

Wow.

Chitwood

34:19

Injuries to deputies—this is a big thing the union fought me on. “You’re going to get deputies hurt.” Injuries to deputies dropped by 50 percent. Injuries to suspects dropped by 50 percent. And here’s the best part of all this: Crime dropped by 20 percent, and our arrests dropped by 15 percent. And I said to myself, “Tell me what we’re doing wrong. Somebody tell me what we’re doing wrong?”

Donelan

34:41

Right.

Chitwood

34:41

Here we are, we did 2020 statistics. 2020 statistics almost mirror the same exact scenario.

Donelan

34:49

Is there a cost?

Chitwood

34:50

The study cost me \$90,000 to get done by PERF. And every step of the way, we didn't wait to get the final report to implement things. Every time they would study something and say, "Hey, the best practice is A," we would institute it. So, little by little, like eating an elephant, we took one bite out of the apple until we got to where we wanted to be. And there was a cost associated with it because there were things like, you know, we converted, I think, 75 shotguns to less-lethal shotguns.

Donelan

35:18

What about the social workers? Did you have to have people on call? Was there any increase like?

Chitwood

35:23

What we're doing right now is we have a pilot program going on in Deltona. We have 10 iPads out on the street with the supervisors that give us instant access to a certified mental health counselor. The dispatchers are currently also going through mental health crisis training. They're able to access and tell responding deputies, "Okay, it's Mike Chitwood who's there; he's in mental crisis; he suffers from schizophrenia, does not react well to lights and sirens and uniforms. His mental health counselor is so and so." So, prior to even arriving, we're able, in some cases, to reach out to the mental health counselor and say, "What do we need to do?"

Donelan

35:59

What would somebody say is bad about it? I'm missing it.

Chitwood

36:01

Nothing. We're having great success. The question's going to be: We don't have the monies to put a mental health counselor out on the street 24/7, 365. We have that sporadically, but the iPad gives us access, and in some cases you just hand the iPad to the person in crisis, or the family member and you just back off and let them do what they need to do.

Donelan

36:21

That's just making such good use of technology.

Chitwood

36:24

The iPads are... Florida Power & Light Company wanted to be part of the program and bought the 10 iPads. Daytona Beach Macy's bought the 10 iPads so that they get involved in this pilot program as well. There [are] public-private partnerships there because everybody recognizes how important this is.

Donelan

36:41

I was going to say, and you're improving these relationships in the community. You're expanding. You're bringing the business community in, and that's what we're always looking for. How can people get involved? They do want to get involved in a proactive, meaningful way. What could be more meaningful than that?

Chitwood

36:56

Right. Because who in our families don't have mental health issues?

Donelan

36:59

Sure.

Chitwood

36:59

Who in our families don't have substance-abuse issues? If you say "No," you're lying, because we all have it. I have it in my family.

Donelan

37:04

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. And when we're talking about things that I want to get into—the protests and the unrest, which really speak to ongoing, long-driven issues. The defunding of police, you know, from a layman's point of view, that may seem like a simple thing—yeah, stop giving them money—but the reality of the impact of that, right? Like, this costs money to do [the] sort of things that everybody's asking for: de-escalation, non-lethal use of force, dealing with mental health patients instead of locking them up—those things cost money at the end of the day, too. What's your position on sort of what you see unfolding as a result of what happened after George Floyd was killed in terms of the solutions to the problems there? And I'm going to ask you about what happened at City Hall, because I know your soul was speaking to you as this was all... as you're watching this unfold.

Chitwood

37:59

Yeah. The first thing I thought when I saw that video was, I wanted to reach to the TV screen and grab that officer and—

Donelan

38:05

Yeah.

Chitwood

38:05

—say, “What are you doing, man?”

Donelan

38:07

Yeah.

Chitwood

38:07

I mean, what are you doing? You hear the man can't breathe.

Donelan

38:10

Yeah.

Chitwood

38:10

And then the second thing I also would like to say is, you know, Mr. Floyd's daughter said, “My daddy changed the world.” And I think that we all have to take heed to what she says and we have an obligation to do that, because what we all saw, although people still try and justify it—it just blows my mind that anybody could justify what happened or attempt to do that, but I guess, you know, everybody's entitled to their own opinion. That was a changing moment in law enforcement, was a defining moment for everything that we do, and what do we need to do better?

Law enforcement changes all the time. It's forced to change, which is a good thing. And if you look over the last 25 years, of all the things that we have done, we're constantly trying to change, but it takes a certain incident, is what pushes us to make those changes. Defunding police, I can just tell you this: 80 percent of my budget goes to human resources—that's salary, that's benefits, that's pension payments, and that's basic equipment. So, then it leaves me 20 percent to buy police cars, get gas, new equipment, and training. There's not a lot there. When they cut your budget, what's the first thing they go after? Your training budget. It's the first thing they go after. And then they tell you—

Donelan

39:19

It is the last thing that needs to happen because we're trying to build better police officers.

Chitwood

39:21

Exactly. That's the first thing. And I've been, you know, sheriff going on my fifth year, I've been a police chief for 11 and a half years, and I could tell you: Every time they cut my budget, the first thing they zero in on is your training number comes out first, then they go to your equipment. So, you're not getting any new equipment or new technology in. You're not training your people appropriately, and you're just basically paying salaries and you're treading water. So, when they talk about defunding... And then also, you know, people do depend on us, you know, people do depend. When they call us, they expect a response. And if you can't respond, the help, that further is a divide between police and community relations because "I called the cops for help and they never showed up" or "they stopped responding to loud music calls." Well, hey, if I got to get up and go to work and my neighbors got a brass band playing from, you know, 10:00 at night to 4:00 in the morning, I can't sleep, my kids can't sleep, and the cops didn't come—that erodes quality of life in your community.

Donelan

40:19

It does. Now, Daytona, City Hall, you spent a lot of time there, you're the former chief in that city, and you took what many considered was an unusual step following the unrest that occurred last year, following the death of George Floyd. You visited with the protestors and I'm going to presume it was to express your understanding of the need for police and communities to move past, but I wanted you to tell me, like, I don't like assuming. Why did you do that? How was it interpreted by everybody?

Chitwood

40:46

Yeah. Different people interpreted it a different way, but overwhelmingly we got glowing results. Deltona had a group of young folks—college students, high school students, church members—that they wanted to march from City Hall to the Deltona Police Station. And it was typical Florida fall—rainy. It just rained cats and dogs. So, we got everybody lined up, I made sure that we had every intersection taken care of so that the folks could get their message across and walk to the police station. And one of the young folks says, "Well what are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I was going to, you know, just make sure that you guys get where you got to go." "So, you're not going to, you're not going to march with us?" I said, "Well, you know what? If you're going to get wet, I'll get wet." So, we did the two-and-a-half-mile walk, and then we got under cover and I held myself out on a question and answer session with the folks. Ask me anything you want to ask me, and I'll try to answer it as honestly as I can. You might not like it, but I'm going to give you the answer.

And I will tell you the questions that those folks asked me, every one of them made you stop and think. They were very introspective questions: Why do the police do A? What's your belief about this? What's your belief about that? Why do officers... So in a way, we were exchanging ideas that understand their point of view, and they could see our point of view, and disagree where we weren't going to agree, but also find that common ground that, you know, "Hey, I never understood that." I really never thought the community looked at us. We're out there doing our job and you're not viewing us as doing our job.

You're viewing us as coming in the community and creating more of a divide as opposed to bringing us together. And then, there were some things that you explained, well, legally, this is what we can and can't do. Big question was about White supremacy. You know, we know for a fact that there are White supremacists that live in Volusia County. We know for a fact that they hold meetings. We know for a fact that there's motorcycle clubs that drive around. Why are your deputies not stopping them and taking them and do this and do that? And I said, "Well, there's a thing called the first amendment."

You know, it's not against the law to belong to a hate group. We may not like it; we find it disgusting and despicable, but they're allowed to drive around with the rebel flag sewed to the back of their jackets, you know, they're allowed to profess some of the things they profess on Facebook. That's just how the first amendment works. We just can't go out and lock them up for that. And they kind of understood when we explained to them how that works, that, "Oh, so you don't support White supremacists?" No; we don't support any extremist groups, but we just can't lock them up because they're members of that group.

Donelan

43:17

It's tough being a police officer. It's always been tough, but it feels like it's the toughest it's been in recent times. But then you look back at history and you look at, you know, and I know you saw your fair share in Philly of, you know, behavior that was like, aah that's not right, certainly wouldn't be accepted in 2021. Do you think 2020, what happened, what's still happening, do you think it's like a snapshot in time? Do you think we're going to get past this? We've got—and I'm sorry, I'm asking like 35 different questions in one question—but I just want to talk this through because, you know, we don't have a national police system. We've got amazing associations. You mentioned PERF, you know, there's IAFC, I mean, I know that we have ways that these different agencies can connect and share best practices and policies, but what happened to George Floyd happened thousands of miles away from where you are, and yet you were dealing with it where you were.

So, the impact that one officer can make on the entire profession, we saw that. Will we grow from this, will things actually change, or do you think it's a snapshot? Enough time passes, we'll be able to move on. Has the profession been damaged irrevocably? You know, what are your thoughts?

Chitwood

44:28

I'm an eternal optimist, but I'm not optimistic at what you just said. I don't see us coming out of George Floyd, the summer of unrest, and January 6th. I don't see us making that turn. Unfortunately, what I'm seeing is we somehow for a centrist nation who sometimes leans a little left or leans a little right, and always depends on common sense—we're allowing extremism to seep in the modern way we think, to the mainstream America, and that extremism is polarizing us to what everybody should look at and say, "This is unacceptable in policing. This is unacceptable in American society." What happened to Mr. Floyd—unacceptable. Now we're seeing extremism say, "Well, wait a minute, you know, what was so bad about it? Look at his criminal history. Look at this, look at that." Stand by. What happened had nothing to do with the past. And by the way, nowhere in American jurisprudence, does it say being

arrested for a bad check or having a drug problem or doing whatever, you get executed on a street. It doesn't say that anywhere but you're seeing such a division that I'm worried and I'm more worried for my children and grandchildren, especially of what kind of country are we leaving them?

The argument that I hear is: Well, the right extremism, nothing is bad, they're worse than the left extremism. And I'm like, you know, you need to look back in the history of the world. Look back to how Hitler came to power. You know, what were the brown shirts? The brown shirts were the far-right extremists who battled the far-left extremists. So, you had one extreme group fighting the other extreme group; in the meantime, a dictator got into power. And guess what? Don't think it can't happen here. It can happen here in a heartbeat. It, you know, our form of government is the most fragile on the planet. And we're supposed to safeguard that. And if we can't approach these issues with common sense, look at something and say, "It's wrong." I'm worried about that. And for the profession, you know, I have 60 openings and I have people retiring and I can't fill those slots because we can't get enough folks to apply. That's the other reason why we went into this academy thing that maybe we can start to rebuild our reputation because you're right—one rogue officer can destroy a country.

Donelan

46:48

And then that's what I'm worried about, right? First of all, for those who are working in law enforcement right now, today, out there on the street, supporting them, right? Because they put that badge on these days, no longer, is it a "Oh hi, Mr. Officer," you know? Yes, that still exists, but it's just so much different now, right? And so, making sure they're okay and they're feeling good about themselves and the job and will stay with the job, but let alone attracting new people to the gig. I was literally looking at the protest thinking, "Why aren't they setting up recruitment tables at the protests?" Effect change from within. Come on, sign up, bring it on. We're open. We're ready. Because we can't not have police officers. You just talked about this earlier on when you're... you go to the community meeting and crime is down 40 percent, but they're worried about the speeding on Deltona Avenue. The fact of the matter is everyone—they deserve to be able to walk out of their house and not get beat up, their car should be sitting where they parked it, it shouldn't have broken windows and been rifled through, they should feel safe in their neighborhoods. You do need public safety in order to assure that. And so, you've got a tough job in front of you right now. I mean, it's ... Do you sleep?

Chitwood

48:02

Only when I'm driving to and from work. [Laughs]

Donelan

48:06

Don't say that. [Laughs]

Chitwood

48:07

But to your point, you know, when I speak to these young folks, the young protestors, I tell them if you have all these wonderful ideas, you know, you really affect change from within. I'm talking to a group of young folks here and a lot of these are in college, going to college. You know, you're the future sheriff, you're the future police chief, you're the future mayor. You got to get involved. And then you ask, "How many of you registered to vote?" And of those several hundred kids that were of voting age, it was less than 5 percent with their hand up. I said, "You can't do that. You're out here because you believe what occurred was an injustice and rightfully so, and you're marching for change in a driving rainstorm, but yet you don't want to join my organization and you can't vote. You're kind of spinning your wheels here. And that's what change comes all about. When I tell them, when somebody from your background gets into the police car with somebody from a completely different background, you guys got to work together. You got to work together to solve problems during that 12-hour shift. Now, don't you think if we do it long enough, I'm going to see the world kind of like you see it and you'll see the world a little bit like I see it and together we're going to fix problems, but—

Donelan

49:10

Got to get in to do it. Yeah. Right. Think you're on something here. I mean, I really think that angle of really drawing light on that, because look at all of the programs we just talked about that you've enacted—the mental health supervisors, the body-worn cameras before it was popular—you know, you had to be in that position for those things to happen. And you're right. Everybody can sit around and complain. I can sit around and complain until I'm blue in the face, but in order to actually effect change, you know, if you can't beat them, join them. Come in and change from within. And you need diversity. You need a diverse set of opinions, a diverse set of experiences, and then you got those people at the table and, you know, maybe we can do something there.

Chitwood

49:47

Yeah. I mean—

Donelan

49:48

Sounds really simple.

Chitwood

49:49

The thing is—it is simple. But everybody wants to muddy the waters in a way that, you know, it's the old thing—okay, I know where I got to go, I know what I have to do, but yet 75 people want to get in and tell you how to get there, and you're like, "No." If this is really, really an easy fix because we can diversify, I think, if we put the effort into it, we can diversify. But right now, I cannot attract African American candidates. I can't. And in the state of Florida, these numbers aren't really accurate, but let's just say in

2018 or 2019, 3,500 people graduated from the state academy and were certified police officers. Of that 35, 75 percent were White, 20 percent were Hispanic, 5 percent were African American. 10 years earlier, that number may have been 11 percent African American.

So, over the past decade, the number in Florida, the number of African American candidates is consistently dropping. And I can't get an answer of how do we reverse that. Conversely, the number of Hispanics is starting to grow, and the number of women is starting to grow, but African Americans are more increasingly turned off by law enforcement.

Donelan

50:59

What have you done so far? Because I'm sure that's the same story for everyone, quite frankly.

Chitwood

51:03

We partner with a Historically Black College, which is Bethune-Cookman University. You know, I use one of their outstanding professors to teach implicit bias and do community workshops with us. And I get to go into class and talk, and they look at you and tell you, "Yeah, we're going to apply," and they're not doing it. We go to the military, you know? And that goes back to learning the history of our country. You know, I ask all of my recruit classes, "Anybody ever hear of Bull Connor?" There's crickets in the room. You know, they're 23, 24, 28-year-old kids. They don't know who Bull Connor is and you got to tell them. And they say, you know, when you go in the minority community, you got to think of this because there are still people alive who remember that. I'm on a panel on Saturday to discuss lynching, that there was a sheriff in this county that a Black suspect disappeared and was found dead, and nobody knows how he got dead. All they know is the sheriff's deputy was transporting him from point A to point B; he didn't make it to point B, and he ended up dead. This was like 1940-something. And nobody ever went to jail. Nothing ever happened to anybody. And there are people alive today in Daytona Beach who lived when that happened.

Donelan

52:15

And, you know, you bring up a great point. I mean, I think that our leaders, whether it's law enforcement, et cetera, you do need to know your community's history because there are long memories and it's the foundation on which the community is built, you know? Again, right, wrong or indifferent, this is part of our history and if you don't know the history, how do you move forward, right?

Chitwood

52:34

Exactly.

Donelan

52:36

So, you have such a wealth of experience. You have been leading from the front, to put it very plainly. Could you leave any words of advice to your fellow colleagues about what they can do, what they need to keep in mind, any advice as they try and drive changes to their own organizations' cultures?

Chitwood

52:59

Yeah. Change is never easy. And whether you're elected or appointed, you have a very short window to make change. So, if you think by going with the status quo or I'll practice the ostrich style of police management—just put my head in the sand and say it doesn't exist—your tenure's going to be short. If you go out and you're bold and innovative and creative, your tenure's going to be short. So why not be bold, innovative, and creative, and leave your organization better than you found it? Because if you think you're going to stay around and be a chief or sheriff for 20 years, it's not going to happen. So, you were given an opportunity: Lead, and lay the foundation, and push your organization to be a better organization than it was when you got there; in the long run, that's what all this is about. It's going to help our community and our society in the long run.

Donelan

53:52

And I got to say, Sheriff, I think your messages about your philosophy on transparency and timeliness are so key right now; that if they're making decisions based on being as transparent as possible and as timely as possible, they really can't go wrong. I mean, I think you have shown that and demonstrated that through your entire career.

Chitwood

54:14

I agree, you can't... Like I said, the cover up is always worse than a crime. You make a mistake, you admit it. "Hey, we made a mistake. We've got to fix this together." But when you cover it up or try to hide it or try to mitigate it, you're in for a world of hurt.

Donelan

54:26

So, if any one of our listeners would like to get in touch with you, is there a way that they could do that?

Chitwood

54:31

Yep. I used to be a lot faster at responding to my emails, but I get so many of them—

Donelan

54:36

Yeah.

Chitwood

54:37

—and sometimes it takes me a couple days to catch up. They can email me at MChitwood, C-H-I-T-W-O-O-D-at-vcso.us. So that’s the initials for Volusia County Sheriff’s Office, mchitwood@vcso.us.

Donelan

54:56

Listen, I’ve got to tell you, I thoroughly enjoyed this talk with you. Thank you. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your schedule. Really, really appreciate it.

Chitwood

55:04

Thank you, Jennifer. I really appreciate the questions.

Donelan

55:07

Absolutely. Well, best of luck in everything that you’re doing. We’ll be watching in awe, I’m sure. And I want to thank our listeners for joining us on *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

55:19

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

56:17

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