

Responding to Hate at Colleges and Universities

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 everyone and welcome. I'm Jennifer Donelan, thank you for joining us on *The Beat*. Today, we are so pleased to welcome Noel March. He's the Senior Director for Public Safety and Security and Chief of Police for the University of Southern Maine where he is responsible for the Department of Public Safety. Prior to his current position, Chief March was the 39th United States Marshal for the district of Maine. He also previously held the position of Director of Public Safety for the University of Maine where he was a recognized subject matter expert on the topic of community-oriented policing. He's a graduate of the 170th session of the FBI National Academy as well as the University of New England and the University of Maine Graduate School. Chief March, thank you so much for joining us.

Chief Noel March

01:06

Hello, Jennifer. I'm glad to be here. Thank you.

Donelan

01:09

Moving between campus law enforcement and being a U.S. Marshal seems to be a unique story for law enforcement careers. Can you tell us a little bit about your early career and how you ended up with such a unique background?

March

01:24

Well, that's part of the long and continuing story, Jennifer. The date of August 4th, 1980, is when I was first sworn in as a full time police officer, but I'd like to add for any law enforcement officers who are listening—they probably have a story not dissimilar to mine—there was some influence, there was some impression, made early on that really triggered that spark of interest of this calling. This calling, the police service, being a guardian in the community, and we all at one time or another in our job or interview or otherwise have declared that we want to help people and make a difference. And that's what a calling is.

In my case, as a 12-year-old boy, I met a deputy sheriff in Maine. I lived in Connecticut at the time, but I met the deputy sheriff who explained to me when I asked the question, “why do you have a shotgun in the back of your car?” And I knew he was a police officer, but what do you do with that shotgun? And

that deputy thought for a moment and he said, "Well, Noel, I protect myself with that shotgun, but more importantly than that, I protect others who can't protect themselves." And I'll tell you, Jennifer, that lead really to some introspection, really introspection on my part, even as a 12-year-old boy, to think about just how noble that role is, the one who is called upon when you were afraid, or vulnerable, and you need help when you can't help yourself as the police officer that is asked to come help.

And I saw that deputy sheriff as, who later sadly will be killed in the line of duty—

Donelan

03:05

Oh my god.

March

03:07

But I saw him as 10 feet tall and quite heroic. And I don't think that was just, you know, the impressions of a young boy at the time because I came to learn quite a bit about that man and I tried to emulate some of what he did in his life. So if we have a mentor or a person who is an inspiration to us that leads us into this profession, or someone that helps us grow within the profession, I think that's always a good strategy and we're fortunate that we have people in our lives that can do that for us.

Donelan

03:39

Well, your story just goes to show no conversation is necessarily insignificant. You know, here's that man talking to a 12-year-old boy who had no idea, later on that little boy would grow up to be a chief, a U.S. Marshal. I mean, that's amazing. And he lost his life in the line of duty.

March

03:59

He did, on duty. Unfortunately, he was in a terrible car crash, not his fault. He was responding to a drug investigation case in progress. And he never reached that case, but you know, his family and I are still friends to this day.

Donelan

04:13

Oh, really?

March

04:14

And his daughters. And our lives do go on. You know, as a police officer in Meriden, Connecticut, that summer of 1980, I soon went to the police academy, but during my academy time on a particular weekend, my partner, the man that I had been hired with, who is also in the academy with me, off duty, fell into a deadly force situation where he was acting as a police officer in interrupting a felony in progress.

Those individuals who are committing the crime tried to kill him. He had to defend himself with deadly force. That resulted in a demonstration in our city against the police. It was a conflict that involved race and city members from Hartford, Connecticut, had come to protest the police department, asking for that police officer to be fired, and so forth. We see these in this— Here we are, you know, 40 years later, we're seeing these incidents occur in our communities still to this day.

But my point is that it was the following weekend that 35 hooded Ku Klux Klansmen showed up on the front steps of our city hall. Now, this is the state of Connecticut, and here we are in the month of March, 1981, little did any of us know that there was a cell of Klansmen in Connecticut and they had called upon their Imperial Wizard from Alabama, Bill Wilkinson, to come and lead them in a support protest— counter protest—in support of the police, which we wanted nothing to do with. Neither did the approximately 3,000 citizens who showed up to defy the Ku Klux Klan being president—correction, present—in Meriden, Connecticut. That devolved into a riot and 23 of our 30-some-odd police officers— I was present to that morning with a hard hat and a wooden baton, we weren't equipped or trained— but approximately 30 of us were there in a line of uniformed police officers standing in front of the Ku Klux Klan with their bullhorns and their signs. There's picket signs on sticks made of baseball bats and ax handles. Support your local police.

I'll tell you, that was a tipping point in my early career when I began to really appreciate the depth and breadth of hate and the power of our constitution's first amendment as well. Juxtaposed. And we ran to get those hooded Klansmen out of town onto buses, and the rocks and bricks flew, and officers were injured, Klansmen were injured, members of the community were as well in that stampede. That night we were on the CBS evening news with Walter Cronkite. Little did we know the previous day that the national spotlight would be on Meriden, Connecticut. But it was the day also for me to decide that I needed to stand for peace and I needed to stand for victims' rights. I needed to stand for fairness, equality, and understanding.

And I made that commitment at that time. And I think that led to the way I would carry out my work and the way my profession would unfold over the course of the years ahead.

Donelan

07:50

It's a tipping point in your career. It was, it sounds like to me, a moment that shaped you as a man, as a human being.

March

07:57

It did indeed. My father was a first-generation American. He was a U.S. Army World War II liberator of imprisoned people in one of the Buchenwald concentration camps in April of 1945, serving under general George Patton. My great grandfather was an immigrant to this country and a Russian Jew. My great, great grandfather was a member of the Union Army and was killed on September 16th of 1862 in the Battle of Antietam.

The reason I share these, these pieces of my background, is because that also helped shape who I am today and what I believe. The battle of Antietam was the tipping point as well in the Civil War when President Lincoln, at the conclusion of that bloody day, authored the Emancipation Proclamation. And from that day forward, the Civil War would be nearly solely about the abolition of slavery.

So these ingredients in my own family's story—thank goodness my great great grandfather had one child left back home in Connecticut, because from that one child came my entire family. So these are the stories that affect us personally and hopefully will help shape us for who we are to be and carry on, you know, family heritage and our commitment to each other.

Donelan

09:20

Talk about the uniqueness of policing a campus. You know, you're talking about residents who are young, energetic, vocal—

March

09:31

Sure.

Donelan

09:32

—some of them away from home for the first time, maybe, perhaps not the best decision makers in their social hours. What has been the uniqueness of that, and what would you offer for those who are in campus policing as your keys to success?

March

09:51

Those who were followed the path of campus policing or public safety know this to be true, that of these 4,200 approximately colleges and universities across this country, each one represents a very well defined and quite diverse community. They're almost like a town within a town. And they're made up of a demographic, as you pointed out, Jennifer, of mostly young people, many of them out of their homes for the first time, not all of them, of course, many of them sleeping away at college, not all do, some commute. But here we will find that almost every state is represented in so many of the student bodies of our colleges and universities as well as international students and scholars that come to study or work at our colleges and universities. So you can have a fairly rich melting pot of often quite idealistic and sometimes unrealistic young people. But this is the role, this is the job of higher education. To form and to educate and give experience to these young people such that they come out as more enlightened. Now, their challenges are numerous, but the opportunities are even more so.

There are about 30,000 public safety officers among these colleges and universities across the country that are protecting these campus communities and the faculty, staff, and students that reside or work there. About a third of those 30,000 are sworn police officers and the rest are non-sworn public safety officers. They share the same responsibilities, but have a different mix of authority that comes with

those various versions of protector. What I have found is that the students are great. They really are, and they are experimenting with pushing the envelope on these new freedoms that they have, but the officers can be and should be educators first and enforcers last. And part of what we know in community-oriented policing is that if enforcement is the first order of business, it typically means that nothing else worked, everything else failed, and the different options and efforts to gain voluntary compliance with the law and to gain appreciation for respect and responsibility for one another's rights and property have not been successful.

The police officer on a college campus can model what a student and faculty and staff should expect from police officers in the communities of their own homes, or the communities within which they will reside in the future. And that's a very big responsibility. You're setting a bar of modeling an expectation of public servant as a critical thinker, a communicator, which means being a listener, and being a problem solver with that member of the community, and being a police officer who is part of the campus community, not apart from the campus community.

Donelan

13:00

I was on the campus of Virginia Tech University shortly after those shots rang out as a reporter in my former life. Campus violence is something that must keep you up at night. The potential of it, the possibility of it happening. It just seems that no place is safe. When you have Sandy Hook Elementary and you have schools and universities and how much of that, if you had like a pie chart, how would you break up "here's what Chief March worries about or is concerned about."

In terms of device of events, the division as it is right now, potential of problems arising out of differences of opinions between people, people wanting to hurt the students on your campus. Where are they on the pie chart? Do they take up a large part? What are your focuses?

March

14:03

Well, I think it's impossible to put a percentage on, or measure a concern or probability of the threat. But what we have now is more information, sadly more experience, and fortunately a greater understanding of mental health issues, of what the ingredients are and what the clues and cues—what the red flags—are around an individual who is emotionally disturbed and may be circling the drain toward a bad act. You know, there are far more numbers of interventions of cases where the person of concern did not turn violent, and we were able to get our arms around that individual before it got so bad in their life and their decision making that they victimized others.

We do live in a little bit of a different time, don't we? Where earlier, as a boy myself, as a young kid in school, I remember air raid drills where we would, in our case, we would sit in the hallway with our faces between our knees and our hands over our head until the practice was over. I remember asking once, "why are we putting our heads between our knees?" That was uncomfortable. I was told that in case the bombs come and the glass explodes in our classroom windows that we won't be blinded. And I want to tell you that, you know, as a second grader, I found that to be quite terrifying.

Donelan

15:43

[Laughs] You seem to remember that conversation.

March

15:45

I will remember it forever.

Donelan

15:49

Yeah.

March

15:51

And you know, the planes and the bombs never came. That doesn't mean that, you know, violence won't be visited upon our schools again sometime in the future. But this is a shift, this has been a sea change, but over a course of many years. In the 1980s, unfortunately, the U.S. Postal Service was hung with the handle of "going postal" because there were a number of incidents around and we don't say postal violence. And there were acts of violence at UB's cafeteria, at McDonald's in San Ysidro, California, we didn't refer to it as restaurant violence. But it's different because of our hearts being so vested in our children. And it shocks the conscience.

Donelan

16:32

And it's happened so much in this country with the school violence.

March

16:38

It will, well, it has. I certainly don't mean to minimize it.

Donelan

16:41

Yeah, no, you're not. Sure.

March

16:41

But workplace violence from Microsoft to Amazon or, wherever this—

Donelan

16:48

Right, yeah.

March

16:49

—you know, this occurred. We have found that this is a shift in extreme behavior. You know what, when I was a new police officer—and any law enforcement officers that might be listening may relate to this—that earlier in my career, boy, it was something to get a call to go to a bar fight. And what you found at the bar fight was one guy looks at another guy, or another guy looks at your girlfriend. And what are you looking at? And this thing slowly ramps up to finally chairs getting pushed back and maybe swearing and a shove, let's take this outside. And it takes quite a while to get to the point where fists are being thrown. What I've seen in my career is that has accelerated to one cross look turns into a blitz of the chair be broken over your head or being stabbed, or maybe being shot.

Donelan

17:36

Or a gun pops out.

March

17:37

On the spot, right. So you've stepped on my sneakers and now you're going to die. This is an extreme example that I just offered, but you understand it's going from zero to 60 in a blink of an eye.

Donelan

17:47

I say, you say extreme, and sadly a real possibility.

March

17:50

It's reality. It's different.

Donelan

17:52

Yeah.

March

17:52

It's different now.

Donelan

17:53

That's scary.

March

17:55

It is, but I also tell anyone who cares to listen—your listeners here, as well as what I tell students at our university—don't live alarmed. Don't be afraid. Live aware.

Donelan

18:00

Live aware. Now, speaking of your sage advice, I understand that you have a degree in peace and reconciliation studies from the University of Maine. Wow. That is not a discipline that I think is common for many professionals in law enforcement. Although, I think it should be. I didn't even know it existed. [Laughs] I don't know if they offered it at my college. How has that influenced your work?

March

18:36

The back story there is that as I continued to hopefully mature professionally and became a father of three beautiful children, I came to appreciate my father's own story of liberating a concentration camp. He shared with me just before he died. It's the longest conversation he and I ever had in my life. He finally told me—those World War II guys don't speak of their experiences—but he finally told me of what he saw at that terrible place.

See, my dad was in seminary, he was going to be a Catholic priest before enlisting in the army. He didn't step foot in church again after the war, having seen things that his eyes can never unsee and being in a place of questioning the very existence of God because how could one man do something so terrible to another man?

And I thought on that and wanted to further my understanding of how can we prevent the violence? How can we prevent the pain? Being proactive, being a practitioner of community-oriented policing, we find strategies to keep the crime from occurring in the first place and not being reactive to try to pick up the pieces after the fact. Peace studies, whether it be hate crime, intervention and involvement, whether it be engaging ourselves with our vulnerable communities, learning from one another, understanding one another, would help prevent crime. And I believed that and I wanted to know more about that. I'd long wanted to have a graduate degree and, having worked for the university, I had the opportunity to do that.

Donelan

20:31

How does the handling or classification of a hate crime on campus differ from the handling or classification of hate crimes that occur in the broader community? Is there a difference?

March

20:41

The short answer is no, there is not a difference, but the longer answer is it is handled in a much better fashion. And the reason we're able to do that—well, first let me point out, as I alluded earlier, there are a number of backgrounds and cultures and experiences both demographic, geographic, sociographic from all over the world found on a college campus. So there is apt to be conflict, and there's apt to be misunderstandings, and there's apt to be hate that comes with the misunderstandings.

Gosh, after 9/11 of 2001, our college and university campuses were found to have an uptick in hate incidents towards a Sikh student from India because those who practice may wear a turban, and the local student from town who doesn't know the difference, doesn't have the cultural competency to understand the differences, engages in hate behavior.

Now, what we have at a college and a university typically is a multi-disciplinary. You have an approach, a counseling center, a dean of students, a multi-cultural director, a public safety or police leader, and student leadership all under the same roof. We have resources to circle the wagons around the incident and around the students and help them to understand. And I have found Jennifer that peer-to-peer empowerment where we have students correcting other students' behavior. It's not the grownups telling the youngsters what to do, what not to do or say. It's one another, setting a tone of not just tolerance, but inclusion and respect and understanding and support for one another. Isn't it interesting when the students team up around the victim and call out the bully that the power imbalance shifts?

And it's not a dissimilar scenario when there is a hate incident to see the students of a university or a college rally around and say, "No, that's not who we are as a community. That is not the standard or the value that we embrace and we're going to make our voices, our feelings, and our position on this known." We can't always pull that off in the community at large. We have a much better opportunity and chance at success in a campus setting.

Donelan

23:25

One of the things that I was really curious about, and wanted to talk to you about, was the fact that you are dealing with the age group that you're dealing with. And on the subject of hate crimes, is there any level of difficulty in discerning between I'm dealing with this is a clear-cut, racist incident, or is this an immature human being who's still quite frankly a child and lacks judgment, but the repercussions of his or her behavior is having an impact?

March

24:01

Sure.

Donelan

24:01

So if I don't deal with this in a certain way, I could cause more issues. How do you navigate through that?

March

24:11

Well, in the scenario that you just offered, we use an approach called restorative justice, and that's where if it's pretty clear to us that it's a student's ignorance—

Donelan

24:25

Sure.

March

24:26

—naivety and immaturity that has been using slang or slurs or insults that they may have been accustomed to on the playground from wherever they came and may not have been called out and held accountable on, in our community they will be. And if we can organize—and we do—a peer-to-peer—listen, the word in social science is intervention—but if we can have the person who has to be held accountable sit face-to-face and eyeball-to-eyeball with those who those words have hurt, we can build some understanding. That's the educational opportunity and we've seen change. We've seen maturity and understanding come to light.

Now there's a difference between a hate incident and a hate crime, and they need to be approached differently, but it's a community solution, it's a community response and not solely a police response. Matter of fact, in most cases police should not be at the lead of setting community standards. Our police should be supporting those community standards with fair and equal treatment, enforcement, and expectations.

And this speaks a little bit to something that we were talking about just earlier. And that is as police, we have to make deposits into what I call the community trust bank account every single day, every opportunity we have. Because when the time does come that there's a flash point of hate and the kind of emotional response that's apt to come from a community, if the police are involved in that or the police are expected to respond to that, what you have to be ready for is to make a hefty withdrawal from that community trust bank account, because you want your community to say, "Oh good, our police are here. They will know what to do." Or, "I know that they will help us because they always have." You don't want it to be said, "Finally, they're getting their comeuppance." Or, "These guys are—it's now our turn to finally show that we've had it." It makes a huge difference if you have trust, confidence, and credibility as a police service or public safety officer or public safety department coming in as a guardian and as a problem solver and as part of the solution as opposed to already have been viewed as part of the problem.

Donelan

27:02

That sharing is so key. Thank you so much for joining us today on *The Beat*.

Voiceover: Disclaimer

27:08

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Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

28:07

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