

Race, Equity, and Policing in Spartanburg: A conversation with Police Chief Alonzo Thompson (Part 1)

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8



Chief Thompson shares thoughts on policing in aftermath of George Floyd killing

There are literally hundreds of policies, procedures, regulations and best practices that law enforcement officers are taught and trained (and retrained and retrained and retrained) to utilize. The teaching and training and review never ends. Spartanburg Police Chief Alonzo Thompson says drilling on various aspects of policing and reviewing the actions of officers is a core component of his department.

But after 37 years in law enforcement, Chief Thompson says that if he could ensure his officers remember just one thing when they interact with someone — whether that person is suspected of a crime, is the victim of a crime, is wealthy or poor, white or Black, man or woman, young or old — it would be this:

“I tell people every day, if we treat people the way we would want someone to treat our most beloved — our parents, our grandparents, our children, our wives and husbands, whoever we love most — more times than not, we’re going to get it done and we’re going to get it done right.”

Could the solution — or, at the least, the start to the solution — to reducing instances of police brutality, rebuilding trust and creating safer communities lie in a simple Golden Rule-like approach? Inherent in treating someone else “the way we would want someone to treat our most beloved” is a humanizing process. Instead of seeing a potential criminal or a vagrant, you see a fellow human being.

As people watched the video of George Floyd with a police officer’s knee on his neck — at its core, an act of dehumanization — something broke. In a recent interview, Chief Thompson talked about what he thinks has changed in the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing and on a range of topics related to race, equity, and policing. What follows is Part I of that interview:

Q: There have been many other incidents — including many that were videoed — that were a flashpoint in time and led to demonstrations or protests, but the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd was different. Why is that?

Chief Thompson: I think it was a tipping point — where a lot of people just said “Enough.” As a law enforcement professional, I can tell you that was a tough one to watch for me. I’ve seen others like most

of us have, and I've been critical of other incidents. I also admit that in the past, we have been cautious about getting out in front of an investigation and perhaps making a statement that taints the jury pool. But we are in a moment now that you have to speak up and speak out. I think it's incumbent upon us in law enforcement, still being mindful of ongoing investigations or not wanting to jeopardize a case, but it's more important to protect human life. If we truly want to be held accountable and be transparent and build trust, then when we can speak up and speak out in a responsible way, it is important for us to do so. In the George Floyd case, I was very proud of our association, the South Carolina Police Chiefs Association, to quickly come out and condemn those actions.

Right after that, I had the occasion to make some comments here to protestors and to express my concern about what I had seen. The knee across the neck is never something I have been taught nor have I taught it to anyone else. It was wrong. Period. When we see something that is wrong, we need to say so.

Q: Speaking of protestors, how do you balance their rights to protest with the duty to protect public safety and private property?

Chief Thompson: It is a challenge. We are in a situation where we need to protect constitutional rights to protest, while also minimizing disruption or inconvenience to those not participating and definitely not let it deteriorate into destruction of property. I commend my folks for their resolve and restraint and engaging respectfully with protestors — I think that is the right way to respond. I think the way we have tried to respect and engage people on a day-to-day basis builds social capital and goodwill. That is not to say everyone in the city thinks we're great and love us. I'm not implying that. And there is a big difference between protest and violence, so there is a line to walk.

When it comes to the protests we had here, we have had people upset about them and urging us to shut them down and ticket or arrest protestors for impeding traffic. But you have to balance that with people's constitutional rights to protest. So I am not going to impose impeding traffic violations in the cases of peaceful protest — people's constitutional rights trump that.

Q: The protests go beyond calling attention to George Floyd — they are about demanding a more holistic change in policing and there is a growing chorus of voices nationally that say that the problems go well beyond just a “few bad apples.” How do you respond to that?

Chief Thompson: First and foremost, I would respond by saying that people are rightfully upset and angry. And I understand why they are. I'm a law enforcement officer, I've been in law enforcement now 36-plus years, I'm proud of it, and I think it's a noble profession. I think we're needed, and I think that most of us do a good job. But even some of us who are good and well-intentioned can make bad decisions. And then there are some of us who don't need to be in law enforcement at all.

Q: So do you agree with people who say the problem isn't that police departments don't know about problem officers, but rather that the problem is that they protect those problem officers?

Chief Thompson: Well, again, I think George Floyd has resulted in less reluctance to speak out. But that whole "code of silence" has not been prevalent in my career. I can't speak for all law enforcement agencies and I will not say this "code of silence" does not exist. But both in Winston-Salem and here, when we've seen fellow officers engaged in wrongdoing, we told somebody. We took some action. Because most of us realize if we don't, it's going to bite us. No one hates bad police or police misconduct more than we do, because we're going to be painted with a broad brush. When something is done wrong, it's going to be applied to all of us.

For example, we've had a case here, no one reported it to us, we found it through our body-worn camera footage. This guy was not representative of us, not of the SPD way, nor of law enforcement in general. And now he can't be a police officer again in this state because of his use of force. No one called us to complain, but we found it and we policed it ourselves.

We have always been under a microscope. It's always been that way. But it's as intense now as it's ever been in my 36 years. As a result, we have some people reluctant to do their job as they once did, some who will not get into the profession, and some who are choosing to leave the profession at the earliest possible convenience.

Q: Speaking of people looking to get into the profession, what do you look for when making hiring decisions? Are there certain things you see as red flags when making hiring decisions?

Chief Thompson: It's the most important thing that we do. You are looking for people who are wanting to be team players. I look for people who are "others" focused not self-focused.

Q: How do you figure that out?

Chief Thompson: It's tough. There are aptitude and skills tests - that to me is the easy part. The hard part is to pick up signs through the psychological tests. Trying to see if this person might have some hostility or judgement issues. Or is there something in the background check that may indicate some type of harmful bias. I'm looking for life experience and what kind of exposure have they had. I'm looking for maturity. Some of this is hard to quantify, to be perfectly honest. But you're looking for people who are going to be honest and truthful with you, first and foremost. In that interview, I'm really listening to see how much of a servant's heart they have. They need to have different tools in the toolbox - if all they have is a hammer, then everything is going to look like a nail. That's not who you want.

Q: Are there more conversations going on in police departments today between white officers and Black officers about race and racism? Are there white officers who are at least asking questions and opening their eyes to things and experiences that their Black fellow officers have experienced?

Chief Thompson: I hope so. I would like to think both in police departments and the community overall, we are having more of those conversations. They are uncomfortable but we have to get comfortable being uncomfortable. I talked to all of our folks — I told them a lot of the angst, energy, passion, hostility please do not take it personally. Please understand it is not being directed at you personally. You did not do some of the things people have seen and are protesting. But we as a law enforcement community and as a country have. We have long, enduring, unresolved issues as a country. Since 1619. We ain't got it right yet. But we have to do our part to get it right. We have to be the example of being fair and equitable in how we treat everyone.