

Police need to get to know the people in their community

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police July 1, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on responses to the George Floyd killing* 

Gadfly's been inviting stories about police/community relations as we approach a Public Safety Committee meeting on our use-of-force directives and a Community Engagement Initiative . . .

from Dana Grubb, "Racism: One man's thoughts." Bethlehem Press, June 30, 2020.

When he was only 4 years old, Frankie West's parents decided to move their family north and ended up settling in Bethlehem. They had suffered one of the ultimate discriminatory experiences when, because of the color of their skin, they were refused admittance to the beach at Myrtle Beach, S.C. That was when they decided to move. West carries that scar deep inside and has only returned to Myrtle Beach once since, to watch his niece play basketball in a game at Coastal Carolina University.

West would attend Liberty HS, where he starred in basketball and football for the Hurricanes. He has worked with youth since, at both the Bethlehem and Easton Boys and Girls Clubs, as well as coached young people in basketball. He believes he may have been the first African-American assistant basketball coach at Liberty, serving under head coach Richie Wescoe from 1985 to 1987.

He has participated in Bethlehem's annual Dr. Martin Luther King Civil Rights March since he was a teenager, and today is the lead organizer for the event. That march ends in Martin Luther King Park on Bethlehem's Southside, where he recently sat down to discuss the murder of George Floyd, racism, his experiences, recent protests for racial equality, and offered some thoughts on how to improve relationships between white people and African-Americans.

"My sadness is that two officers just stood there and did nothing," West started out about Floyd's murder. "That's bull; you don't see a cop doing

that to a white man's neck," he said. "I watched it, shook my head, and said that's not fair."

"Some of them get a badge and they think now we're in charge," said West, adding that he's not really had issues with the Bethlehem police. "We have had good police in Bethlehem and if they showed up at your door, you know you were in trouble with your parents, too."

But, he did have an exchange with police on an occasion when he was walking back home from his job at the Easton Boys and Girls Club. He noticed one police car following him and before he knew it there were three. An officer stopped him wanting to know who he was and where he was going.

West said he questioned why the officers didn't know him, since he was working with youth in their community. Things got a little testy with the officer, whom he felt was not being respectful.

The police need to work with the youth even more, West said, and they need to get to know the people in their community. They need to work harder at conveying the message, "If you need us we'll be there" to the people in their community.

"Cops need to protect themselves, but they don't need to kill people," he finished his thought.

Regarding peaceful protests, West said, "We should keep protesting until we get the change.

"African-Americans are angry," he said. "Where's the change? It's going to get worse if we don't do something." He respects the protesters, he said, but due to Covid-19, he has not joined them.

He said he laments the fact that nobody has come to Martin Luther King Park to protest.

"Why not here instead of at City Hall? The man who really fought for you is right there," he said, motioning to the MLK Monument at the park. West said King wanted to do it the right way by obtaining equal rights for everyone.

As far as the violence and looting associated with some of the protesting, he wants to remain peaceful about bringing attention to the issues.

“Why are you screwing up your town?” he asked.

While some things have changed since Dr. King, West cautioned, “A hell of a lot of things need to change.”

He questions why more minority vendors aren’t seen at area festivals and events. More minority coaches are needed in scholastic sports, he said, and mentions his two mentors, Art Statum and Willie Howard.

“They said it like it is,” he said.

West remembers the ‘Brotherhood Club’ at Liberty and recalls that it was a great way for young African-Americans to learn more about people like Dr. King. He’d like to see something like that return.

He’d also like to see more interaction between the police and residents, noting that family dynamics have changed greatly since his time growing up in Marvine-Pembroke. He said he thinks police officers need better training for how to respond to different situations.

Finally, West said everyone needs to do a hard self-check.

“When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror ask yourself, ‘Am I prejudiced or am I real?’

“We want to be treated fair and honest,” he said. “Give us a chance.”

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