

#48 (SHON BARNES)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

The Reducing Crime podcast brings you conversations with influential thinkers in the police service and leading crime in policing researchers.

Shon Barnes is the police chief in Madison, Wisconsin. A new documentary follows Chief Barnes and two other black police officers as they undertake a historic civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. I chat with Shon about his embracing of education and evidence-based policing, the challenges of working with communities in the post George Floyd world, and the lessons he took away from his three day trek across Alabama.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm Jerry Ratcliffe, and welcome to Reducing Crime. This month sees the release of a new film, The 54th Mile Policing Project. The 17-minute documentary follows three black police officers who undertake the historic civil rights walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. The Selma to Montgomery march was one of a number of civil rights protests that occurred in 1965. An initial attempt to complete the march saw Alabama state troopers beat the group at the Edmund Pettus Bridge with whips and night sticks. Televised images from the incident shocked America, and are credited with spurring not only greater awareness of civil rights issues, but also the eventual passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 a few months later.

In the process of undertaking the walk, spurred by the awful murder of George Floyd, the three officers discuss life challenges, being honest, open and vulnerable, talking about being black and blue, and wanting to be more than just a figurehead talking change.

The documentary is, in many ways, a metaphor for pushing through challenges and adversity to achieve real meaningful life goals. It's also a window into three thoughtful men discussing the zeitgeist and their place in the world.

The three officers are Tarrick McGuire, Deputy Police Chief in Arlington, Texas, Dr. Obed Magny, who recently left policing and is now an executive coach and leadership speaker in the area of emotional intelligence, and my guest for this episode, Shon Barnes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Shon Barnes has been Chief of Police for Madison, Wisconsin since February 2021. Chief Barnes was the Deputy Chief of Police in Salisbury, North Carolina, and before that, he rose to captain with the Greensboro North Carolina Police Department, where he began his career as a patrol officer in 2000. Like his fellow walkers, Shon is a National Institute of Justice LEADS scholar, and he is a council member on the National Policing Institute's Council on Policing Reforms and Race.

His policing focus has been on neighborhood beat level policing, stressing police neighborhood ownership, and community engagement. Dr. Barnes has a BA in history in pre-law and a master's degree in criminal justice from the University of Cincinnati, and he was awarded a PhD in leadership studies from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.

I sat down with Shon at last year's American Society of Evidence-Based Policing Conference. By the way, a conference I highly recommend. He discusses being a black police leader, racial profiling and racial bias in a post George Floyd world, and big questions such as, "Would you rather be hit by a semi-trailer truck or kick a Pomeranian dog?" Listen to the episode, it will make sense.

As you join us, we were just chatting about Shon's fellow walker, Obed Magny, who, if you don't know him, is kind of shredded...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of the most annoying things about Obed is that every now and again, I follow his gym sessions. I try to do something in the gym, but I turned up here, and his arms are like my fucking waist.

Shon Barnes:

I know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You obviously look after yourself, but he is a monster for the gym.

Shon Barnes:

I worked out with him once, and he had to go to Instagram to complain that the hotel gym dumbbells only went up to 55 pounds. That's like, okay, first of all, they're not trying to get sued for killing someone.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you guys know each other since when? Sorry.

Shon Barnes:

2016.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You met through the LEADS program.

Shon Barnes:

The LEADS program. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So how long have you been in law enforcement?

Shon Barnes:

I've been in law enforcement for 15 years. Was a captain, got promoted pretty quick up through the ranks. Was fortunate to have a chief that really believed in evidence-based policing and kind of pushed that thing forward.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wait a minute. I've heard they're mythical. Where is this magical beast? Where was this?

Shon Barnes:

This was in Greensboro.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You actually found a police chief who was into evidence-based policing?

Shon Barnes:

He was. He was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do we clone that person?

Shon Barnes:

That's a good question. But yeah, he was into it, and he certainly allowed me to experiment. Before the leads program, I was contacted from a company called HunchLab, and they had a software program called predictive policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. This is Azavea.

Shon Barnes:

That's correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Shon Barnes:

That's correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're based in Philadelphia. Very smart people from that company. Yeah. HunchLab was their predictive policing software program, and then it was purchased by ShotSpotter.

Shon Barnes:

Right. So I conducted the first quasi experiment led by a police office or a police department on its effectiveness. At the time, we worked a four on/four off schedule. So half patrol work, half patrol didn't, so it was pretty easy to set up a quasi-experiment kind of looking at that, along with Dr. Lee Hunt, who I think, you know.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Did the ideas of evidence-based policing kind of gel with you, or when your chief started this, were you like, "What the hell is this?"

Shon Barnes:

Not at all. This is the way I'd always policed. I got a master's degree from the University of Cincinnati, so learning under Robin Engel and John Eck, and some of those persons that kind of turned on that light bulb inside of me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Did you get classes from anybody we've heard of?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

John Eck is like a luminary in this field. Of course, Robin Engel's been known through policing for many years.

Shon Barnes:

Absolutely. So I met them, and they kind of just turned the light bulb on, but I've always been interested in doing things better. Even as a young police officer, I took accountability of my area. I remember one story where we were getting crushed, where this guy kept breaking into stores to steal the flat screens when they first came out, and I went to the analyst and got some data and literally predicted that he was hitting on Wednesdays and caught him in the act, and I'm two years in as a police officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nice. Good work.

Shon Barnes:

I was all in, and from there, I was just all in, wanted to know more.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Data evidence is going to make us look good.

Shon Barnes:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you made it up to captain in Greensboro?

Shon Barnes:

In Greensboro. That's correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you're originally from...

Shon Barnes:

I'm originally from a very small town called Murfreesboro, North Carolina. Not Tennessee.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. It's a small town, because I've never heard of it.

Shon Barnes:

It's very important, because Robert Vaughn, who invented the cure for smallpox, is from there. Charles Gatling, who invented the Gatling gun, you may have heard of it. It kind of revolutionized policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So what sort of town is this that one end, you've got the Gatling gun, and then you've got a smallpox cure?

Shon Barnes:

It's a town that...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It seems like it's extremes at each end.

Shon Barnes:

It is extremes at each end. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How can we save as many people as possible? Nah, fuck it. How can we kill as many people as possible?

Shon Barnes:

Absolutely. Yeah. He invented something that revolutionized, I think, law enforcement. I don't know if he knew it at the time, but he's from there. It's a pretty good small town. It's a town that borders Virginia, so most of the people in my town, growing up, they work at Newport news ship building and Virginia, and so for me, I spent summers at Virginia Beach, because it was only an hour away. Getting into all kind of mischief, I should say.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, you know, but as long as it doesn't appear on Instagram, you're all right then.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, there was no Instagram back then. Thank God.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, I know. Right?

Shon Barnes:

I wouldn't be sitting here.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, you and me both. So you were getting into the idea of evidence based policing with leadership driving that, which is great. So you ended up applying for the LEADS program.

Shon Barnes:

I ended up applying for the LEADS program. They sent a solicitation to my boss at the time, a deputy chief, and he was like, "This sounds like you." So he called me in his office and said, "Hey, you're interested in this?" I took it back, I looked at it and I had completed the HunchLab experiment, so I thought it was a pretty good demonstration project, and I got selected, met a lot of great people that we're still friends with to this day, bouncing ideas off, and that kind of spawned into my graduate work, going back to school, getting a PhD and just trying to understand a little bit more about science and how science can influence decision making and policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you managed to survive the experiences of Mo McGough, and then the two weird uncles, Gary Cordner and Geoff Alpert?

Shon Barnes:

Yes, Geoff Alpert helped guide me through my PhD work and racial profiling and traffic stop, so he became kind of like a surrogate father to me and very encouraging, and Gary as well. So yeah, those are my people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Tell me about the work that you did, the racial profiling work.

Shon Barnes:

I realized that as a captain, well, halfway through my dissertation, I realized you actually have to write this thing. So I said-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I know. That's a pain, isn't it?

Shon Barnes:

I got to figure out a topic.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm really enjoying this. Let's make academia as un-fun as possible. You do all this really cool work, and then you have to write it up. Oh man.

Shon Barnes:

Then you have to write it up, and I was all over the place. Do I do predictive policing? Do I do something else? Then I realized, October of 2016, I think, our department was on the front page of the New York Times as the face of racial profiling.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You know-

Shon Barnes:

Do you remember that article?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. You kind of think... When somebody says to you in policing, "Hey, we're on the front page of the newspaper," you know the rest of what follows in that sentence is not going to end well.

Shon Barnes:

It did not end well at all, and I just happened to be standing next to the chief when that came out, and he said, "Hey, can you fix this?", and I said, "Yeah," and I just got into it, but I realized that as a black man in policing, people come up to you with all kind of questions. I had never had anyone who wasn't black ask me, "What do I do when I'm stopped by the police?" There's almost an inevitability that if you're black, you're going to get stopped at some point, and it really resonated with me, and I started doing some research and I came across an article entitled "Toward a Better Benchmark". Geoff Alpert was on it, I think Robin Engel was on it and a couple of others, and it was this idea that you have to understand the benchmark before you can understand the measurement, and it really, really stuck with me. I just started getting into it.

Shon Barnes:

Then the other idea I had was that, "Who's responsible for racial profile?" I think it's bigger than just some rogue officer or, as we say in policing, which I hate, a bad apple, and so I said, "Well, what about leadership? What does leadership have to do with it?" So I started looking at racial profiling from the standpoint of leadership. Where are we telling people to go? And what are we telling them to do? This whole idea of hotspots. I discovered that racial disparities and stops does exist, but it exists only in certain areas. If you look at a highway, you'll find that more white females are being stopped, but if you look at eras of high crime where we as leaders tell people, "Go there, do something, because I got CompStat in the morning," then you see it, and so we have to do a better job in leadership of giving good direction to understand how that affects people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Maybe there's also a piece about educating the community that there's a conflict here, which is if you're going to send police to an area, you do so because you hope they're going to reduce crime and violence, but if all the crime and violence, or as much of the crime and violence is focused in minority areas, unless you expect the police to do absolutely nothing when they get there, there's going to be disparity, but I think there's that gulf between the understanding between, what is disparity and what is discrimination?

Shon Barnes:

That's right. That's right. What you have to do is you have to let the community drive that, and so what we try to do in Madison is the captains, they work strategically under what we want them to do, but we want to bring the data to the community. We do a lot of community meetings, community groups, and we say, "These are the number of cars that were stolen in your area. What do you think we should do about it?" Guess what they're going to tell you? "Go out and put some bad guys, hold them accountable and prevent crime," and then you go into routine activity theory. You talk about Felson and Cohen.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Look at you, a police chief talking theory here. I'm loving this.

Shon Barnes:

There you go. There you go. It makes sense to them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, and then from there you say, "Okay, well, this is what it will look like," and then once you get their thumbs up, it's hard to come back and say, "Hey, you know..."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. You tap into some of their cognitive dissonance.

Shon Barnes:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is what you have asked us to do.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't think enough chiefs... I don't think enough police departments are doing that. They have this almost adversarial relationship with the community, and it's like, no, if you go and explain it in the right way and use the right kind of credible messengers, you can get the community to kind of tell you what they would like you to do, and that's democratic policing right there, right?

Shon Barnes:

That is the key. That is the key.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Within the constitution and all that kind of good stuff.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, because procedural justice is a big part of that. So you'll tell them, they'll tell you what they want you to do, you'll tell them how you're going to do it, but then you also have to explain to them what the interaction should look like. You know, "Hey, this is how we'll talk to people. This is how we'll do that. We'll let people know, 'Hey, we're not fishing, but hey, you ran the light or you're going 70 in a 35,' and we don't want that for our community." I think that goes a long ways.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a great way of putting it. You went through the LEADS scholar experience, the law enforce... I can't remember...

Shon Barnes:

Law Enforcement Advancing through Data and Science.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. It's a bit of a tortuous one, isn't it?

Shon Barnes:

It is. I realized... Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We got there in the end, but that's right. Yeah.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you went through that experience. Intellectually, you found your tribe a little bit.

Shon Barnes:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think that's a big thing, right? That helps, because there are lots of people in the leasing who are still stuck in the late 1970s.

Shon Barnes:

Yes they are, and they are a strong bunch, let me tell you. We are the exception to the rule, but we need to flip that 80/20. We're about 20% right now. We have got to drive the others to think a little bit differently about how policing should be done in America. Yes, there are bad guys that need to go to jail, but there's a way to do it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

One of my favorite quotes from Jack Maple, and I paraphrase a little bit, is he said, "Most police departments are the same. About 40% are hiding behind their desks. 40% are doing the job, but not by having much energy. 10% are actively seeking to undermine any good thing that you want to try and do, and 10% treat the job like a profession, and that 10% at the top do 90% of the work," but I'm a little fascinated by his understatement of the 10% at the bottom, because that's the 1970s, 1980s kind of crowd who are like, "No, it's real simple. We just need to arrest everybody and throw everybody up against the wall." They're kind of the real knuckle draggers, and they are holding back progress. There's no doubt there.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. They're holding back progress, and they're creating discipleship every day, and so as a leader, you have to be strong enough to address it. I've always done it in my career as a rookie. I'm talking about... I'm not even off probation, but I'm on my own, and you go out to eat at 2:00 AM on a night shift there, and they're like, "Hey, why are you taking so long on calls? Just give them the ticket and move on. Why are you over here? You haven't even got a call there yet. Why are you over there? You need to be available for calls to service and all this other kind of stuff," and I'm like, "Listen, I have a badge, I have a patch that says 'City of...', I'm going to police. See you later," but most people don't have that, I guess you would call it moxie, in order to do that. I've always had it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you say discipleship?

Shon Barnes:

Discipleship, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Tell me about that.

Shon Barnes:

What happens is you come into policing and you realize that your recruit mates, they're going off to their own squad, and you're by yourself, and so police are pack animals, and so you want to find a group, you want to find a group that's going to take you in, and they'll always take you in. Those groups that... Have you ever heard the phrase "misery loves company"?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Shon Barnes:

Well, that's not true. Misery loves miserable company. Misery doesn't want to be around people who are happy. So when someone says, "Hey, how's the wife?", what they're looking to hear is for you to complain and they can start complaining, but I'm always like, "Oh, she's great. Loves me to death. Made me breakfast in bed." They'll go the other way.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go. There's a real conversation killer. "Is your life as miserable as mine? Then I don't want to talk to you."

Shon Barnes:

That's exactly right, and some police officers are like that. They want to make everyone else as miserable as they are.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're often so successful too.

Shon Barnes:

They are. I recently talked to a police officer who was interviewing for lieutenant, and he had one of the best interviews I'd ever had, because he told me how miserable he was at work, and then he said he found out that you could actually be proactive and do good stuff, and he said for the first time... He admitted, "Hey, I was your curmudgeon." He just said it, because we knew who he was, and he said to me, he said, "I never knew you could be happy at work," and I said, "Yeah, that's what happens when you're allowed to innovate, when you're allowed to solve problems and problem solve. People tend to realize that you can be happy in this profession."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You know, it being kind of data driven and evidence based, I think the numbers are really useful, and it always leaves me concerned when the only number of police officer can tell you is how many years he has to retirement. I never think that's a good sign.

Shon Barnes:

It's never a good sign. Cops and prisoners are about alike, in that we all have the same conversation daily. How much time you got left?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Shon Barnes:

That's true. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How many years did you do in Greensboro?

Shon Barnes:

So I did 15 in Greensboro, and then I was asked to come to a little small town called Salisbury, North Carolina, just north of Charlotte. Bedroom community, about 40,000 people, were experiencing crime above and beyond what most cities their size were occurring, and then they had an officer-involved shooting, where they shot a black male doing the service of what's commonly referred to as the no-knock search warrant.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is now, unfortunately, the Breanna Taylor warrant.

Shon Barnes:

Absolutely, absolutely, and it just destroyed that community, and the chief at the time had only been there for about six months.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I assume it was career-ending for the police chief?

Shon Barnes:

No. He had only been there for seven months, so he had no relationships built. So for those new police chiefs who may be listening, spend time immediately building relationships in your community, because it could happen on day two for him. It happened way too soon.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. The honeymoon period lasts minutes, right?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. He went straight to domestic disturbance, I think. I met him at something, and I don't know where, but he just called me out of the blue, asked me if I could come give him some advice, and I did, and then the city manager said, "Hey, we want to have dinner," and I did, and then what followed was a very generous offer sheet to leave Greensboro and come and help them with their community engagement and crime reduction.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What role did you take there, then?

Shon Barnes:

I took the role as deputy chief, but before I took the role, I took the sheet back, because I was fine at Greensboro. I talked it over with my wife, and I wrote a bunch of stuff on the offer sheet, and I said, "God, if they agree to this," I was like, "I want a Tahoe. I want this."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are you're adding blue M&Ms in here? That kind of thing?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. I was like, "I really love Hot Pockets. I need as many as I can get in the morning," and I sent it over, and then they came back with, "Yeah, and we'll give you a little bit more than what you asked for," and I said, "Okay, God, you do have a sense of humor after all."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go. Good for you.

Shon Barnes:

So I ended up taking the job, and I was there for three years. We were part of the violent crime network. It's now called the public safety partnership, because our crime was higher than national average per capita.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This doesn't sound like a dormitory suburb, but...

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, it was rough. It was not, but in the three years that I was there, we were able to reduce crime to an all-time low, 20 year low, and we solved every homicide we had in the three years I was there. We had no unsolved homicides.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's incredible.

Shon Barnes:

You can't do that without community support. You cannot solve homicides at that rate without the community trusting you, and I was willing to be vulnerable, do some things that I thought were right, and there were times when my boss looked at me and said, "I'm not going." I love him to death. We still talk every day, and I said, "Listen, we've got to go talk to them," and he says, "If you want to go, have at it, but I've been here for three months. They've been calling me everything but a child of God, and so I need a break," but we put in the work...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Respect that, because at some point, you've got to recognize that you are not the messenger for this process, and you are not the person to get... I know that left, right and center being in this country with this accent. I can't pass myself off as coming from north Philadelphia. That's just not happening.

Shon Barnes:

No, no, not at all, but we embraced stratified policing as our business model. We embraced procedural justice and community policing cops definition as our community service or our customer service model, and it really worked.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think procedural justice is underappreciated by a lot of people in policing.

Shon Barnes:

It really is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it's been sold as ..., "This is the right thing to do for the public," but the way to really sell it to cops is, "This will help you get more compliance. It's going to be better for your officer safety and that of your colleagues."

Shon Barnes:

It will, it will, and once again, I owe him everything, because he allowed me to really... I did all my evidence-based stuff and going to conference. I think that could work here, and I'm sure all the officers was like, "Don't let him leave the city ever again, because the next time he comes back with an idea..." I hope I don't get in trouble for saying this, but Salisbury was my Petri dish.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's an entirely appropriate phrase if you grew up in the area where smallpox was cured, right?

Shon Barnes:

Absolutely. Yes, yes. Yes, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's in the blood, right?

Shon Barnes:

Yes. Absolutely. First thing that I did was I got rid of the community policing officers. I got rid of them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you think about it, that's quite a provocative move, because that's kind of one of those little things that every department feels like they have to have, right? Yes.

Shon Barnes:

So...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Why'd you do that?

Shon Barnes:

Because I was a Marine, and in the Marine corps, we have a saying, "Every Marine is a basic rifleman," and we believe that. Whether you're the general or whether you're a buck private, you should be able to pick up your weapon and defend your country. In policing, every police officer is a community policing officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely.

Shon Barnes:

What happens is in police departments, we have these sections that are your "community policing specialists". This is my air quotes, y'all.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Air quotes work really well on podcasts.

Shon Barnes:

I know, and so everyone gives them all the work that they don't want to do, right? Then you have these officers who aren't trained, who don't understand procedural justice, and it's someone else's job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. That's the thing. You've hit the nail on the head there. Once we form a squad, everybody goes, "Well, that's their issue."

Shon Barnes:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We've got a squad for that.

Shon Barnes:

We got rid of that, and we made it so that everyone got trained. I did emotional intelligence training. I did a training in customer service. I did a training called path elements, where you figure out what your personality style is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm slightly terrified to do that for myself.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, yeah. It's like wind, earth, fire. So this is real live results.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't need a personality test to tell me what my personality is.

Shon Barnes:

You don't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's what people on Twitter are for.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. So 90% of my department were fire. That tells you a lot about why the community felt the way they did about us. Even the chief was a fire. Now I've done all of these. I've done that, Myers Brigg, the DiSC, I score equally in all of them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go.

Shon Barnes:

I knew that was going to be the case.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You should be a case study or something.

Shon Barnes:

I think I should, because the person who was leading, we hired a consultant, and she just was like, "Yeah, I think you're going to fit in well here." I'm like, "I don't. Everyone is fire and brimstone, and I'm just even keel."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, if you think about policing, policing attracts pretty much alpha males.

Shon Barnes:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's just the women.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, that could be the case. Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So it's not like this is a job that people have got a lot of doubt. It's hard to have doubt in a job where you are sent with very little experience to go and deal with issues. You've got to solve them, figure out what's going on and make a decision and solve every single job that you go to. So there isn't a lot of place for doubt. So it does attract a certain type of person. Certainly if they stay in it, but doubt is one of those things that's really important to develop an interest in evidence-based policing. Your interest in evidence-based policing is really pushing up against that "But I know what to do" kind of mentality that we have. The fire mentality in policing.

Shon Barnes:

Right, right, but it's that quick fix, and the thing that always frustrated me as a patrolman was I just don't believe that it's a quick fix. You go to a domestic and you arrest the aggressor, and there're arguing about finances, and now someone loses their job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a really good example. You just made the cause of their disagreement worse.

Shon Barnes:

Right, and the original study, Minneapolis domestic violence experiment, I understand what they were trying to do, I understand that they were looking at, "What do we need to do so that we don't have to return?" Maybe it should have been, "What do we need to do to fix their problem and not worry so much about how much time we're spending there?", because that should be the goal in policing. It should be underlining causes, figuring out what's wrong and getting them the service that they need, and it shouldn't be in these quick fix... Yeah, I can arrest a person for domestic violence, and certainly I don't condone that type of thing, no one does, but does that really fix the problem? If it doesn't, we're doing something wrong.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, it's an interesting thing. It's always that rush to get back, what we call into service, but when you get back into service, you're actually not doing anything.

Shon Barnes:

That's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're in service should be when you're actually trying to resolve this couple's issue to the stage where we get the best outcome for the people. Not, "Are we going to get called back again?"

Shon Barnes:

Absolutely, absolutely, and then I wonder, do we create these unintended consequences of people who just don't call? "Yeah, I understand that I got abused by my husband, by my wife, but if they go to jail, how's that going to affect my finances?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Or, "If you guys turn up, it's never ended better for me."

Shon Barnes:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. So you're in Salisbury and everything's going super-duper, and then George Floyd happened.

Shon Barnes:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was that like for you?

Shon Barnes:

George Floyd, for me, was one of those moments where I didn't recognize the ramifications of it immediately. People were calling me who I knew who, were African American, going, "Hey, did you see this video?", and of course, I'm busy and I kind of look at it, the sound's off, and I'm like, "Okay. Yeah, I kind of see it."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I had similar experiences, like, "Really? Is this just another one of these..."

Shon Barnes:

Exactly. Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Kind of excessive use of force, and I never saw it until I was like, "Whoa, hold on a minute."

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, and then things will go back to normal. We know the cycle. Community outrage, protests, apology, the family says, "Hey, can everybody respect my dead loved one?", settlement, no charges.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Might have a little investigation. Not a lot happens.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. Absolutely, and the thing for me is that we mentioned earlier, those officers who rejected evidence-based policing...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Like the dinosaurs.

Shon Barnes:

They came to my office and said, "Chief, what the hell is this?", and that's when I said, "Let me stop what I'm doing and take a look at this, because if they're outraged, it's got to be kind of bad, right?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I had a similar experience when I walked into my office at temple, and I'd only been in the states for three weeks, and I was walking past and some people were watching television, and I said, "What are you watching?", and somebody said, "Somebody just flew a plane into the World Trade Center," and I thought, "Oh, that's bad," but I had visions of a Cessna 172, like a four seater, and then when I got down to my office and everything shut down, "I'd better look at this video again, see what's going on."

Shon Barnes:

Yes. It was certainly like that for me, and Tarrick McGuire and Obed Magny, who are both NIJ lead scholars, we had been planning the year prior to go to Selma, Alabama and kind of get a deeper dive into this issue of police community relations, but when George Floyd happened in the middle of a pandemic, which is why we delayed our walk, we all talked and said, "You know what, it's now or never."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Was the genesis of the idea for you?

Shon Barnes:

Tarrick had went to Selma to visit and found himself on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

A bit of a pilgrimage almost, then?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, and he said he felt different there, and he just started saying, "Hey, we should do this, and we should document what we do and maybe take some photos," and I agreed to do it. You know, your friends call you and say, "Hey man, let's walk 54 miles." "All right, sure. Let's do it. Let me know," and then you think about, "Wait a minute, what did you just say?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I didn't know much about it, but I had my suspicions, because I'm, obviously, friends with Obed Magny, and when he's starting to dump arms day for legs day, I thought, "Hold on a minute. Something's up here."

Shon Barnes:

Yes. No one wants leg day.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Nobody likes leg day in the gym, right?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. So we didn't train like alleged. I think I walked seven miles one day and was like, "Oh, I'm ready. I feel pretty good!" We were not prepared. They make these things called camel packs, where you can put water in them. So the day the walk, I get my camel pack out. I pour a half a gallon of water in it, and I don't close the other end of it. So when I put it on, like at mile seven, my back is wet, my rear end is wet.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Rookie mistake. Yep.

Shon Barnes:

I was like, "Why would they do that?" It doesn't make sense to me. But no, it was just a great experience. We began by spending the day at Brown AME Church, where John Lewis, who was someone who I knew, was a member there. Yes. Yes. I have some photos with him.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Getting into good trouble.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. Good trouble. Absolutely. Yeah. Spending some time with him, which was really great. At Brown AME, we got a chance to do what I love best, which is go through archives. So my undergraduate degree is in history. I was a high school history teacher for four years before being a police officer. Everyone says, "Why'd you leave teaching to be a cop?" I needed to do something safe.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right? Yeah.

Shon Barnes:

So I went into being a police, but it was...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it also speaks to your dedication to public service.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. Yeah. It was eye opening, and Jerry, just looking at what people went through at that time, and what actually happened.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you also say, "At that time," it's not like it's in the eons of history. It's all too recent.

Shon Barnes:

It's very, very recent, but it lets you know why people are upset, and the protests were beginning. You can see the fire building, but it helped me to understand more, like what happened on that bridge. Bloody Sunday, to get to know the story of Jimmy Lee Jackson, from the time and place where it happened, a 26 year old army veteran protecting his wife and child from an Alabama state trooper's baton was shot and killed. That trooper was eventually convicted, and when he was 70, did a couple of months in prison to give people closure, but that actually happened.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. In the lifetimes of people who are still with us.

Shon Barnes:

Exactly. So it's still fresh in some people's mind, I can imagine it would never not be, and they've passed that story down, and what you don't understand about the African American communities is that we share our stories. That's why I'm a history major, because my great-grandmother will tell me these stories about the depression and things of that nature and you...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But then it also raises challenges about how to overcome that narrative, because when that narrative spreads and exists as a story that continues within a community, to try and change that narrative from a policing perspective is incredibly challenging.

Shon Barnes:

I don't think we should change it. We need to embrace it. We need to embrace it. Think about Germany post-World War II. They didn't try to change the narrative of what happened there. They embraced it, they reconciled and then they moved on. They didn't erect statutes to say, "Hey, some of our people were Nazis. We just want to put this marker here and have this holiday, and we're going to name this street after whoever so that we don't forget what they did." It's lunacy that we do that here in America, and I don't know if you know this or not, but the Edmond Pettus Bridge is not named after a civil rights icon. Same after a person who was "the grand dragon" of the Ku Klux Klan. That should not be the case. Why do we celebrate that stuff?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Especially as nobody's ever really heard of him, and hopefully he should disappear into obscurity in history.

Shon Barnes:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How many people did that walk back in the day?

Shon Barnes:

Tons of people, and people still do that walk.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How long did it take you guys?

Shon Barnes:

It took us two and a half days. Got rained on, dogs, all kind of wildlife.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

God.

Shon Barnes:

I found out that Tarrick, who is the biggest of us all...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He's a big lad, yeah.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. Big tight end, played ball at Oklahoma State. Doesn't really like dogs, no matter the size. So we learned a lot about each... I'm like, "Tarrick. That's a Pomeranian." "I'm going over here."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He's picking up the pace heading in the other direction. I'm going to add a few more miles to this, right? Yeah.

Shon Barnes:

Walking with traffic. I'm like, "No, man." He'd rather get hit in the back by a semi, or he'd rather kick a Pomeranian than a...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

My god.

Shon Barnes:

I'm not going to do that. We learned a lot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What were the sort of lessons or the meaningful things that you took away from it?

Shon Barnes:

I think as we reflected on that last mile, when we really started to talk, we got the adrenaline dump and all, is that people want to be seen, people want to be heard, and they want to be accountable to each other, and we get that from the people who stopped. So there were people who saw us walking, they're driving back and forth to work, so they see us, but we don't see them. So in America, people want to be seen for who they are. So this officer who gets out of the car on this domestic or on this shoplift or whatever it may be, looked past the circumstances of where they are and sees them as a human being.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Post George Floyd, it's been a hell of a time to be a black guy in American policing, right?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. Yeah. Post George Floyd was tough. I had counseling sessions with my officers post-protests, being called all kind of names. In African American culture, the worst thing you can be called by another African American is a house N-word.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You can say it here if you like.

Shon Barnes:

I'm good. I might run for president one day, Jerry.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hope you do.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, thank you. That was the person who was the worst of the worst, because he gave away everything for selfish gains, right? But it was deeper than that, because he still had a family, he still had a daughter he didn't want raped. He still had to live in this world, and I can't say that that decision was made lightly, but that's what they called us. They said, "Hey, how can you be a part of this system that has literally and figuratively had their knee on the necks of an entire group of people?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How do you answer that?

Shon Barnes:

By saying, "Yes, police have been part of the system. Justice has not always been defined the same throughout our country, and so I'm here as a black man to change that. I'm here as a black leader to make decisions to ensure that you

see justice in the way it's defined in 2021, not the way it was defined in 1979 in Greensboro, when you had the Klan Nazi shootings, when someone thought it was a good idea to allow the Communist Workers Party and the Ku Klux Klan to have a rally at the same place and tell everyone, 'Don't bring guns.'

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's an honor system, and if any group's got honor, it's those guys, right?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. It's those guys. Yeah. It didn't happen that way, and seven people die, and so people still remember that, and so you have to just try to let them know that you want to be part of the solution. That's why I'm here. That's why we are here, and to hold others accountable.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, because policing's not going anywhere.

Shon Barnes:

People think it is. I probably would've said that two years ago, but being in Madison and hearing some of the rhetoric around policing, I don't know that that will be the case. I don't know, 30 years from now, if policing will be the same. I really don't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think it's always going to be around, because I think there's a reality that there is a small group of the population who are going to need some kind of care and control, and that doesn't collude control. In some regards, modern policing, we've had it less than 200 years. Think how long we've had medical science, and yes, the field of medicine doesn't look anything now like it did 200 years ago, so I think it's going to keep evolving and changing, and as it should. I can't see it not being around, but I think we need to be having important conversations about what it's going to look like.

Shon Barnes:

So I started off as a teacher. I knew about private schools. Obviously, I couldn't afford to go to one, but I knew we were losing a lot of kids to private school, and then now, my home state of North Carolina study recently came out and said more kids are being homeschooled than are in private schools. So public schools are losing kids to charter schools, to private schools, to homeschooling. Could public education be obsolete one day? Why couldn't the same thing happen to policing?

Shon Barnes:

So now we're taking mental health away from police, which I certainly support to a certain degree. We're moving some of our harm-focused things away from police to code enforcement. I've seen some departments do community service departments. In other words, now you have 311 as opposed to 911. So I have to police and lead as if I might not be here tomorrow, and I think that's the key. It'll keep us honest a little bit.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In the end, if you join policing as a public service, if all you're interested in is the output that I'm going to keep paying the mortgage, then you're going to defend policing come hell or high water.

Shon Barnes:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But if you're interested in the outcome, which is improved public safety, then yeah, we should be exploring any mechanism to get there, but I'm just not ready yet to throw away the existing mechanism, because I'm worried about there being a void in the middle, especially for the communities that don't have the capacity to hire private security.

Shon Barnes:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Or to live in a gated community. If we take away what protections that we can give them, until they build those institutions or can find the income to pay for that, they're going to be left with nothing.

Shon Barnes:

The thing about American policing or America in general is the number of firearms. 400 million short guns, handguns, probably another 600 million.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is that where we are? 600 million handguns estimate.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. Yeah. So if you look at Sense and Nonsense About Crime and Drugs, Samuel Walker, they talk about the number of...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's crazy here.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. Yeah. He'll tell you that it's too late. It's too late. There are already too many handguns in circulation. So that'll be a problem that we'll have to fix if before we could do away with policing in general.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're getting these insights. How has the walk you took changed how you approached your role now, because not long after you did that walk, you became the police chief in Madison, Wisconsin. Connect the two. How has the walk that you did from Selma to Montgomery changed how you think about the job of being... Now you're a police chief.

Shon Barnes:

I think it changed tremendously, because your most vulnerable populations, whoever they may be, they want to know that you understand, "What is your pedigree for change?", and the walk helped to further my resume or my pedigree on understanding what America's about, because people who stopped to help us, they weren't just black people. They were white people, they were police, they were truckers. They didn't know what we were walking for, and some of them did, but you get to see what America really is, and they need to hear that in order to move forward. We need reconciliation in our communities, and we need to figure out what that looks like, and it helps you be a better listener. We were together for two and a half days.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Two and a half days endlessly with Obed. Oh my god, that must have felt like two and a half years. He's going to hate me for saying that.

Shon Barnes:

Yeah, he's going to get you. We are so different, in that Tarrick, he is the planner every five minutes, "How far have we walked? Are we on schedule?", and then you have Obed, and he's literally bouncing, jumping and doing jumping jacks, and then you have me, I'm just even keel and I'm balancing Obed's energy, keeping him out of the road, and I'm balancing Tarrick, type A.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you feel at times that you needed some kind of a leash for toddlers on the pair of them?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. I really did, mentally, certainly, because keeping everyone calm...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They were like the odd couple with you in the middle trying to be referee.

Shon Barnes:

That's exactly right. Yeah. Imagine an odd couple with another person.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you've now moved to Madison, Wisconsin, which is a department with a long history of innovation. I had Mike Scott, who's been instrumental in advancing problem-oriented policing, and obviously at the University, Herman Goldstein was there too. What's it been like moving there?

Shon Barnes:

You know, one of the things that attracted me to Madison was the history of problem-oriented policing, something, again, I was introduced to as a young officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I just love the idea that you were not introduced to that at university, but introduced to that as a police officer, because that's also rare.

Shon Barnes:

Greensboro does a great job with their leadership development. By the time you are a sergeant, you know at least problem-oriented policing if you don't know anything else, and have had to show some experience, or you're not going to get promoted down there. You have to have some skin in the game. What have you done? So now our department has four LEADS scholars, more than any other department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What is the thing for you that you took out of being a LEADS scholar?

Shon Barnes:

That it's not about the result, but it's about knowing how to ask the right question, an appropriate specific question, in order to get to a scientific conclusion.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We're in a world of police reform, post George Floyd. You're in a fascinating position, having the authority of being a police chief, but also being a black man in policing. What are your hopes for where policing reform is going to go?

Shon Barnes:

I hope the ultimate goal is to have a police department that's reflective of the community's needs and not reflective of what police want. So we have to think about, "What does the community want? Healing and reconciliation? What does that look like?" Admitting that there may be a better way to do it. We need to think about professionalizing police departments, but we need to start hiring people who are not police to give us more of a perspective. We have to embrace data and science, and we have to handle the issue of racism. Do you have a department that makes it clear to everyone where you stand on issues of gender bias? Where do you stand on issues of race? Where do you stand on issues of mental health and mental wellness? If you can do that, I think we'll achieve true police reform.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So that means perhaps living with the reality that we are still going to have some disparities, but helping the community understand that and getting their buy in to the realities of that as we move towards longer crime prevention?

Shon Barnes:

Yeah. I agree with that. If you think about the research from Tom Tyler and Tracy Meares on legitimacy yeah, how people are treated matters, and so it matters more than the outcome in some cases. If the doctor comes in and says, "Hey, you've got six months to live," the manner in which he tells you that determines what you're going to do next, and so our job is to give people bad news from time to time, but the manner in which you do it makes all the difference.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How much of a role, then, do you think that means in having police take a role in helping to educate the public to understand the world in which they're in?

Shon Barnes:

No, I think we can do some of that, but I do think the community needs to help us educate the community. So it's like, for me, I can't just come out and tell you all the great things that we're doing, but if a researcher like Jerry Ratcliffe says, "Hey..."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nobody listens to me, mate. If I turn up, you know it's never a good day.

Shon Barnes:

Hey, I know. So hey, this is what's working, or your local civic leader or your local pastors say, "Hey, I want to share with you a project that the police department is doing to increase traffic safety." You have to get other people to tell your story.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sometimes you've got to let your ego take a wee step to the side and let somebody else step up front.

Shon Barnes:

That is so true. When I first met my wife, I told her I was amazing. I told her, I said, "You lucked out," and then other people started to say the same thing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. How did that work out? Yeah. Well, to her credit, she stuck around then, right?

Shon Barnes:

It took a while for a call back. I think she was vetting the information that I gave her, but essentially, I got a date and it worked out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, wonderful.

Shon Barnes:

She's a brilliant scientist. Two PhD type.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Great.

Shon Barnes:

Partial cancer biology, toxicology.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't don't take this wrong way, but you are well punching above your weight list.

Shon Barnes:

I am. Yes. I said, "Man, I did well. I did well." I made some good decisions. So yeah, I follow her.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm happy for you, man. Hey, I know you've got to go and do a session in a moment at the conference, but for sitting down this afternoon, spending some time with me, thanks ever so much. It's been really fun.

Shon Barnes:

Yes, sir. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 48 of Reducing Crime, recorded at the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing conference in Columbia, South Carolina in August 2021. A link to the 54th Mile Policing Project can be found at reducingcrime.com/podcast. Instructors can also DM me @jerry_ratcliffe for podcast support materials and transcripts.

Be safe, and best of luck.