

#72 (JOHN MINA)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing crime features conversations with influential thinkers in the police service, and leading crime and policing researchers.

After more than 27 years in municipal policing with the Orlando Police Department, in 2018, John Mina was elected Sheriff of Orange County, Florida. We discussed what drove him to move across to the Sheriff's Office and the benefits and challenges of being a directly elected law enforcement official.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hello, I'm Jerry Ratcliffe, and this is Reducing Crime. In November, 2018, Florida's Orange County voters chose John Mina as their 29th elected Sheriff. He's lived in the county for more than 30 years, starting with the Orlando Police Department where he rose through the ranks and was appointed Chief of Police in 2014. Prior to that, he was a military police officer with the 82nd Airborne Division. The position and role of Sheriff is a uniquely American one, and John is one of those rare entities, a democrat in a largely right-leaning business.

Sheriff Mina is a member of the Major County Sheriffs, Florida Sheriffs, Central Florida Criminal Justice, and the Florida SWAT Associations. He's also a member of the Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force, has testified before the U.S. Congress, and spoken at the White House on law enforcement matters. I first met John through his service on the board of directors for the International Association of Chiefs of Police, where I'm a scientific advisor. He's also on the boards of the local Boys and Girls club, YMCA, United Way, and the Camaraderie Foundation. Yep, he's a busy fella.

So, it was lucky that I had a chance to catch up with him for morning coffee at the 2023 IACP Conference in beautiful San Diego.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's funny, in wandering around here, you can see the people who just eat, sleep, and breathe the job here. The IACP Conference, there's just people, "It's everything. It's everything."

John Mina:

Yeah, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And then, there are other people who got a balance measured life. "Well, it's this, but I'm not wedded to the whole thing."

John Mina:

I would think that's the majority of the people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. But every now and again, you meet those people. You just know when they're off duty, they're wearing Punisher T-shirts, and back the blue, and every piece of clothing that they've got. It's like, "Chill out mate. Chill out."

John Mina:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So how did you get into policing? Was that always the plan?

John Mina:

It was. And I had a couple of interactions with law enforcement at a very young age that led me into this life of policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, I'm guessing they were positive then.

John Mina:

One was. One wasn't actually.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, okay.

John Mina:

Yeah. Me and my mom, my two brothers were involved in a traffic crash. I must have been seven at the time. And, of course, it was the most horrible thing we had ever been involved in. I just had this very vivid memory of the police officer, this nice, clean pressed uniform, and he was clean cut, and he had this nice shiny police cruiser, and he gave us a ride home. I just remember his kindness, and his compassion, and looking up to him like, "Oh, I could be like him one day."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's great. And where was this by the way, or did you grow up?

John Mina:

Stanhope, New Jersey.

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Stanhope, New Jersey. Great.

John Mina:

And then, so fast-forward several years later, I was in high school. My hair was a little longer. I was cutting through some backyards and had another interaction with law enforcement, and that one went a little differently. He was rude. He thought I was committing a crime. He was all disheveled, and just a nasty human being. And I still wanted to be in law enforcement. But I decided, "Well, I'm going to be like that first guy."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You didn't want to be like him.

John Mina:

Yeah. "I'm going to be like the guy that the little kids look up to."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's funny how one of the defining parts of that is appearance. It's interesting that that's what you noted, right?

John Mina:

And you carry that through my career. When people see law enforcement, that's the first thing they notice, the appearance, how people carry themselves. Are they kind? Are they smiling? Are they scowling?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You go to some state troopers in some states. And my God, their uniform is so sharp, it looks like it has a PhD from Cambridge. And everything is buttoned and shiny. You don't think that looks too officious, but do I want to look super officious, and everything shiny, and ready to go, or do I want to look a little bit more disheveled and relaxed?

John Mina:

Yeah, and there's two different schools of thought. I'm more of a traditionalist, and I have a military background, so I like that when I see... You're right, it always seems to be the state police and some others, they just have that traditional historic police uniform, but law enforcement is changing. And I think there are people that do want to see us a little bit more, maybe not disheveled, but maybe a little bit more relaxed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Maybe when I said disheveled, I was just giving myself an excuse for rolling out of bed every morning. But I'm not in the job anymore. So, did you join the job straight away? You went military first?

John Mina:

Actually, while I was in high school, the Army recruiter came to me and said, "Hey, I know you said you wanted to be a cop." He goes, "But I could get you in the army, become a military police officer." And I was like, "Well, that could be my way in." I did that. I went to MP school, and basic training, and when he recruited me, he was like, "Oh..." He goes, "You

want to do Airborne?" And I was like, "Well, what's that?" He's like, "Well, you jump out of airplanes." I was like, "I don't know." He's like, "It's an extra 100 bucks a month." I was like, "Yeah, I'll do it." 18-years-old, 100 dollars a month, I'll take that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's fantastic.

John Mina:

So, people always ask, they're like, "Were you scared the first time you jumped out of an airplane?" I'm like, "No. I was scared the second time and every other time after that." And when I was in the Army, I knew pretty quickly that this is great. I love being in the army. I love being a military police officer, but I want to do this in civilian law enforcement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. In civilian street, as we used to call it.

John Mina:

The Orlando Police Department came to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and they were recruiting soldiers, and that's how I ended up at the Orlando Police Department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's interesting how the role of recruitment and recruiters just finding you at the optimum opportunity seems to have driven a whole chunk of where you've ended up.

John Mina:

Absolutely. I had no interest in coming to Florida, being a police officer down here. My goal was to go back to New Jersey and become a state trooper in New Jersey.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because at the moment, with the recruiting crisis, I think, everywhere is looking for, "How can we change and think about our recruiting." It's really interesting that it seemed to have worked perfectly for you, their strategy.

John Mina:

It did. And that's something that my agency still does today, we travel the country, and military bases, and colleges, and what we just recently started doing, we were sending teams of recruiters to Puerto Rico and getting Puerto Rican law enforcement to come to the United States and to Florida to be an Orange County deputy.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's amazing. Is that because they bring a skill set that's useful, because they're previous law enforcement, or is it just because you've got to start reaching further and further just to keep the numbers up?

John Mina:

All three. So, we have a large Hispanic population. More and more people from Puerto Rico, Columbia, Venezuela are moving to Orange County, the Orlando area. So, we always want bilingual deputies. They're already law enforcement in Puerto, Rico. Why not tap into that experience? And that continues to build our diversity. And I think it's untapped. A lot of agencies, they're going to the New York's and the Chicago's, and what happens is those officers come down from the Northeast, whatever, to Florida, and they're like, "This is great." And they tell their buddies. And then, 10 more of their buddies apply. So that's what we're hoping happens maybe in Puerto Rico.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Like snowball recruitment you just pick up... '.

John Mina:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's great. One of the things that's a big thing here at the conference is the 30 by 30 initiative to get more women in law enforcement. Obviously, if you go on the military side, you're not going to get more women. You'd be able to pick up more women police officers down in Puerto Rico.

John Mina:

Just a couple, that has been-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you grabbed them all.

John Mina:

... Yes, that's a challenge. And our agency has committed to the 30 by 30 initiative. In my, what, 33 careers in law enforcement has been a struggle. I look back at my academy photo and it actually wasn't bad out of the 30 people in there, half were women, but we've got to do better. And women bring a skill set to the profession that is needed and the ability to talk to people and to de-escalate situations. And, I just had the opportunity to go to the Women's Leadership Conference here in California, and it was amazing to see all the women leaders and them pushing up the next generation of women leaders in law enforcement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, it's not even creeping up to just about 14% in the U.S., which is so low compared to other places. I think in the UK it's 36% women in law enforcement.

John Mina:

Yeah, we're definitely behind.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And recruit classes in New Zealand have been 50% for years, I think now.

John Mina:

Wow.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How long were you in the military for?

John Mina:

Just three years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And then, you work for Orlando... So, Metropolitan Police Department?

John Mina:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you rose up through the ranks there?

John Mina:

Yeah. So, I did everything at the Orlando Police Department. I was a bike cop. I was in the drug unit.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I was a bike cop too. It's fantastic. Nobody tells you how cool and fun that can be.

John Mina:

It's amazing. Gets you in shape.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When the weather's shit, it's out.

John Mina:

Oh, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, hold on a minute. Stop, stop, stop, stop. Sorry, yeah, you mean, bike as in bicycle cop?

John Mina:

Bicycle cop, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, no, no, I meant a motorbike cop. Oh no, that doesn't fucking count. I'll have to cut that out now. So, for fuck's sake. I don't know what I'm talking about. So when you said stay in shape, I thought, "Nah, I just sat there and moved the throttle." People are listening to this going, "This guy has no idea what he's talking about."

John Mina:

So, I was having fun just being a regular police officer. And then, a mentor had talked me into taking a sergeant's test. And I was promoted to sergeant pretty early. But what I learned, I was like, "Well, I like this. If I ever want to change things, I can make serious change the higher and higher I advance through this career." And within the Agency I did. So I just kept rising through the ranks, and ultimately became the chief of police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now, I ran into one of your mentors the other day, Sean Duggan, who says, he's your beer mentor, because all you drink is Bud Light.

John Mina:

That is correct. He has taught me the variety of beers that are out there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm so glad, because honestly, God, Bud Light, what are you doing, man? What are you doing? Goodness sake. You're more likely to drown and have alcohol poisoning with that stuff.

John Mina:

So every time we come to one of these conferences, me and Sean, he's like, "Hey, you really got to try this. You really got to try this." And I do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good, good. But in terms of a professional mentor, you said there was a mentor that suggested that you take the sergeant's exam?

John Mina:

Correct. And actually, several of them. Maybe they saw something in me that I didn't necessarily see. I was the acting supervisor for a while. So I had some really good leadership moments that they noticed that I didn't really recognize. I thought I was just doing my thing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's very cool, because I don't think we appreciate fully within any profession, but especially in law enforcement, the role of a mentor to help guide and shape young careers to go in the direction that they should go in. I think young cops can have a tendency to be just enjoying. I did. I was a cop for 11 years. And I spent a whole bunch of it just having fun

and doing the job. I loved the job. But really didn't have any mentorship or guidance as to now start thinking about what your career is going to look like. And it might've been a different experience for me.

John Mina:

Yeah. So, now, in my role as in chief and now sheriff, I have recognized that. So, I do take time to tell a young sergeant, or a deputy, or even a lieutenant like, "Hey, the sky's the limit for you. You got to keep working on making yourself better. You got to take leadership classes. You have to look at how their leaders do things and learn from their mistakes and their triumphs." And a lot of what you can say, you don't realize, because it had an impact on me, you can have a direct impact on their career. And they remember those statements, because they've told me about them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, that's also a key part, which is, rather than just observing other people's decision making and how they do it, is to actively watch and think they do it. I remember speaking to a guy called Kevin Bethel from Philadelphia who said he used to watch Chuck Ramsey, the very famous police commissioner and police leader in American policing. And we used to watch him in meetings. And then, try to anticipate what decision or what he was going to say. And then, try to diagnose why he did what he did and became a much more active participant in meetings even when he's not a participant in the meeting. And I thought that's a really interesting way of looking at it.

John Mina:

It is great advice. And, what I tell him, I said, "Don't only watch law enforcement leaders. Watch military leaders, leaders in industry, the airlines. They're always dealing with some type of crisis. So, it's important to watch all of them. You could really learn a lot." And just like you said, "I wonder what they're going to say. I wonder how they're going to handle that. And how would I handle that? Would I handle that the same?" So you can learn a lot from that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, I used to train myself on how to handle media interviews by listening to recordings of media interviews. And when the question came out, I would stop it. And then think about how I would answer it, and then I would listen to how the person being interviewed answer the question.

John Mina:

Oh, that's smart.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It was an interesting way to practice for going and doing live radio and stuff like that. How long were you the chief in Orlando for?

John Mina:

So almost four years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And how was that experience?

John Mina:

It was a great experience. Being the chief of police in a major city police department is exciting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Define exciting.

John Mina:

Well, it could come with-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just trying to wake up every morning and not have a disaster happen.

John Mina:

... Yes, yes. And I think in my first three months as chief, we had two very controversial use of force incidents, where officers were actually arrested. We accidentally shot a woman during an officer-involved shooting, an innocent bystander. And then, we didn't do a proper search for a woman who had gone into a pond. Her car had submerged. And so, we ended up finding her later about two weeks. And so, after that first three months, I was like, "Can I just have a break? Can I just have a week or a month without anything ever happening?" And I quickly came to the realization that wasn't going to happen. So, I just embraced it. I was like, "What's going to happen today? I'm ready for it. It's fine."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You become a fatalist.

John Mina:

That's right. I'm the right guy, I think. I have a good temperament for this. And I'll just deal with it when it happens. I'll surround myself out with a good team. But I guess the exciting part is, there are a lot of wins in being the chief of police, whether that's dealing with people in the community and getting them to start to trust law enforcement, or just within your own team.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's it like being the chief in a department that you grew up in? You're in Orlando Police Department for-

John Mina:

28 years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... 28 years. Having to arrest officers post a use of force incident. That must be a hell of a thing.

John Mina:

So, yes and no. Especially, in some of the cases, you're like, "That's a criminal act." So, yeah, unfortunately, that law enforcement officer needs to face the consequences just like anyone else would. And I tell people who want to be chief or chiefs from other agencies when they call me about these incidents. And, to me, it sounds weird, but those are the easy ones.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Really?

John Mina:

Those are the easy ones. When it's clear on video, the officer committed a crime, whether they're on-duty or off-duty, that's easy, because he's going to be terminated. The ones that are hard are the ones that aren't quite as bad, where they're going to be people in the community who want this guy's head. And there will be others maybe in the union or in the public that say, "No, they shouldn't have done that." Those are the hard ones. And I always said, "I must be doing the right thing, because both sides are mad at me."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Yeah.

John Mina:

I must be on track there, because the union didn't like what I did. The community activists didn't like what I did. So those ones are hard. And so, also then you deal with indiscipline of, "Hey, I'm this person, this deputy sheriff, this police officer has a mortgage, they have a wife, they have kids, they have responsibilities. And, because of their actions, I'm taking that away."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. But also, I think, this is one of the challenges of being a moderate, and I consider myself a moderate, and I think you do too, right?

John Mina:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is, part of the role is to temper the extreme perspectives of all the other people who often have their agenda, and they'll throw somebody under the other bus for their agenda. And it is what you say. I think there's a lot of scope for continually having to explain to people that sometimes you can actually have... And I don't think there's much space for this today, but you can actually have honest, genuine mistakes.

John Mina:

That's exactly right. And we tell the community time and time again that, "You got to remember, we're just human. We're part of the human race just like you are. We're not perfect. We're not robots. We're not computers. We're have to make split-second decisions." These things happen in the blink of an eye, and hopefully, that person has the training and the experience to handle that situation. But, when we make mistakes, those mistakes are critical. And sometimes people die. And we have to hold ourselves accountable for that, and then be transparent about it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. And I think that's a real challenge nowadays, because it seems like that capacity to tolerate mistakes has almost left society.

John Mina:

That's absolutely right. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I don't know any other field that could do 25, 30 years dealing with the public, having to make split-second decisions, and having all of that on camera, just to be Monday morning quarterbacked by everybody who sees it. Now, I don't envy people who are doing frontline policing these days. I think it's really tough.

John Mina:

That probably plays a lot into our recruitment and retention issue. People see that. They're like, "Do I want to be the guy that activists, they're surrounding my house, and my name's national news?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is a shame, because if they're thinking about that, they're being thoughtful and they're being introspective about the job, and that's not a bad group of people to have.

John Mina:

On the positive side of that, I think, current law enforcement, both leaders and those in the line, they get concerned about the lack of people who want to become police officers, deputy sheriffs. But I always tell them, "There will always be men and women who want to serve their community." We see that. We're getting plenty of applications. I think the problem that we're having and everyone else has is just keeping up with the attrition. Years back, under the Clinton crime Bill, Bill Clinton gave funding for 100,000 officers throughout the country. All those people are retiring right now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes, they are. There's a generational change taking place.

John Mina:

Correct. After COVID, a lot of people saw, "Well, I could work from home in my pajamas." We've had a few leave for that, and we've had a few come back say, "Well, it's not as cracked up to be." Police work is meaningful work. It's meaningful work.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It is. Yeah.

John Mina:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, you were a police chief for nearly four years.

John Mina:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Working for the city council, the mayor.

John Mina:

The mayor.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How was the mayor at the time?

John Mina:

Mayor's great. He's still the mayor today. Mayor Buddy Dyer of Orlando, and loved working for him. I think, what I didn't quite understand as I was rising through the ranks and many officers and even people for lower rank don't see it. You got to remember that the police department is only one of 9 or 10 different departments within the city.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yep.

John Mina:

It's not all about the police, right, when it comes to city government.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Don't say that. Don't say that.

John Mina:

You got the fire department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's your map out, John?

John Mina:

You got public works. You got parks and recreation. You got solid waste. So, it's a big team. You work at the will of the mayor and the city council. So, with that, comes its own pressure and challenges.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They can be city council... I've seen it everywhere I've worked, can be terribly reactive.

John Mina:

Very reactive. And I didn't have this experience, even though I've had some bad situations when I was Chief of Orlando, and I didn't have this. But if you look across the country, it seems like when there is a national incident, crisis happens, and law enforcement is involved negatively, it seems like the playbook is, "Well, the mayor's going to fire the chief. They're going to bring in the Department of Justice to do an investigation."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The worst situation. Then you end up in the consent decree and then you're screwed for 20 years.

John Mina:

Right. And no one wants that. A lot of mayors can learn a lot from, "Hey, you pick this person, stand by them, and support them."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You know they're not going to listen to that. I think I was talking to Chuck Wexler; I think it was last year, was saying, "The tenure of a police chief in the United States now is three years."

John Mina:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Something around that, which is just brutal.

John Mina:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If you've got long-term initiatives, you just can't get them up and running in that time and evaluated. So, what precipitated the move? You decided to throw yourself on the mercy of the electorate, which is bad enough anywhere, but in Florida, good God.

John Mina:

So, I was chief. I was extremely happy being the Chief of Orlando. I was coming up on 27, 28 years at the time. I was thinking ahead. I had never really even considered running for office like Sheriff. I just figured the sheriff that was there at the time is going to stay another 10 years anyway, and it wouldn't really work out. So, I was looking at other things. And then, I learned that the current sheriff of Orange County, then Jerry Demings, was going to leave his term two years early to become mayor. And there would be a special election. But I thought to myself, I said, "Well, who else in our community is more equipped to do that job than me?" I had all the community connections already in Orange County.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You didn't even need to move house, did you?

John Mina:

Did not even need to move. It just worked out perfectly. I had worked very closely with the Orange County Sheriff's Office my whole career. So, I was a little bit nervous about the whole campaigning, and asking people for money, and being an elected official. I didn't know what that entailed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So let's get into that in a moment, but let's just for people just to understand where we're talking about. Orange County is the county that essentially surrounds Orlando and Florida, right?

John Mina:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

With the population of how many? How big? I mean, tell us about the Orange County.

John Mina:

So, Orange County is 1.5 million residents, it's 1000 square miles. And of course, home to Orlando, and Disney of course, as well as Universal Studios.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Orlando is a municipal city within the county, but they have their own police basically.

John Mina:

Correct. Within Orange County, there's 13 different municipalities. Orlando being the biggest. So, the Orange County Sheriff's office is responsible for the law enforcement operations and all the unincorporated parts.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You fill in the gaps basically.

John Mina:

Which are large.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, right. And so, how many deputies have you got?

John Mina:

Authorized 1800 sworn deputies, and about 700 civilians. I do not run the jail.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you're one of the few sheriffs that don't have your own jail. It's just weird, the idea that a sheriff runs a jail, but yeah. Okay. But you don't.

John Mina:

I do not. And that is the beauty of being the sheriff in Orange County. Years ago, I think, it was 35 years ago in Orange County, the sheriff did run the jail. And he was trying to get more money from the County Commission. They said, "Hey, you don't need the money. You're not being very efficient." And he's told them, he's like, "Well, if you think you could do a better job, you guys can take it." And they did. And so, they hired a corrections chief, and they run it just like they would the fire department or other county governments.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Does it work?

John Mina:

Yeah, they're doing a good job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And in a way, it takes off a huge amount of responsibility that you probably weren't familiar with.

John Mina:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because it seems like it's a completely different job.

John Mina:

It is a different job. You're not dealing with the community. You're dealing with the community of people who are incarcerated and their families. And to me, it just seems like there's always bad news that comes out of jail. An inmate is dead, or there is an excessive use of force case by a corrections officer, or a pregnant inmate wasn't given the right care. But there are some positives, like at the Orange County Jail, they have some very good drug treatment programs, but I'm happy not to have it, just a thing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I do have a few listeners from overseas. We should spend a moment just explaining this very unique role of the office of the sheriff.

John Mina:

So, the sheriff is an elected position, a constitutional officer elected by the people in that county to perform law enforcement operations within those unincorporated parts of Orange County. It's totally different from being a chief of police. You're an elected official. You just answer to the people. You don't answer to a mayor, or to a city manager, or a county manager, or even the county government.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a huge amount of autonomy.

John Mina:

One of the greatest parts about being the sheriff is the autonomy and the independence. It's funny you say that, because when I was chief, I would look around at all these sheriffs in Florida, and they had been there for 10, 15, 16, 18, 20 years. And I was like, "I wonder why they stay so long." Well, now that I have sheriff, I know why.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And the answer is...

John Mina:

So, again, I loved working for the mayor in Orlando. But, with the mayor comes a deputy chief of staff, a chief administrator officer, a whole comms team. So the way I explain it to people, other chiefs, and they really get this, I tell them, "The last phone call ends with me."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

John Mina:

So, my people tell me, "Hey, we did this." I say, "Hey, what are we doing about it? Okay, great. That's it."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

John Mina:

It's done. And then, I'll follow up later. But I don't have to call the mayor. I don't have to call city commissioners and say, "This is what's happening." I have relationships with all of them, and especially, items of interest throughout our community communicating.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's just politics with a small P, right?

John Mina:

Correct. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How often do you come up for reelection?

John Mina:

So every four years. I'm on the presidential cycle. I've been the sheriff for five years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. And you're coming up for reelection-

John Mina:

In '24.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... In November, 2024?

John Mina:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So, Orange County is unique, because it's a little bit more moderate/liberal than much of Florida.

John Mina:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And for people who listen in America, they're going to be surprised to hear that, but it's a little bit of an enclave of more moderate-ism. Did I just make up a word? I think I just did.

John Mina:

Yeah. So, a lot of people say it's the little blue bubble in the center of the state. Florida is mostly red, but the people in Orange County are mostly democrats.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And red in the U.S. being-

John Mina:

Republican.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... Being republican or conservative. Yeah.

John Mina:

Conservative. So, it's weird being the sheriff in mostly a democratic county, because usually most law enforcement lean towards the-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Middle East conservatives.

John Mina:

... Conservatives. Law and order and that type of thing. So it definitely strikes a balance. But I do consider myself a moderate. I've been on the other side of issues that are important to the governor. I was against permitless carry in our state, which was popular in my county, but very unpopular in the rest of the state, meaning that position.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

John Mina:

And that did pass, because the rest of the state is by and large republican and-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sadly to the right of Attila the Hun, but yeah.

John Mina:

... Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, what's it like when you have meetings of you and all the other Florida sheriffs? Do they make you sit at a separate table?

John Mina:

People ask that all the time. And so, it's not like that. They're like, "John, you got to do what you got to do. You have to be the sheriff in your county. You're not the sheriff in my county." They understand my position on a lot of things.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In a way, it's real local direct democracy.

John Mina:

It really is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You don't have to pander to the governor, you just have to worry about the people in Orange County.

John Mina:

Yeah, the governor's not going to get me reelected. So, I have to worry about the voters in Orange County. And I think, time as chief and now sheriff, you're talking about going on nine years where this community in Orange County, they've known me, they've seen me 1000 times in crisis situations and other times, when we were holding ourselves accountable. So they trust me to do the job that I was elected to do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you now have to have things like a campaign manager and all that stuff?

John Mina:

Yeah, you have to have a campaign team.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's it like? So, you won the special election, and then after two years you were re-elected.

John Mina:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you must have had a full re-election process.

John Mina:

Yeah. So it was interesting.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What does that involve? I can imagine there are many police chiefs anywhere in any other country have to worry about re-election.

John Mina:

Right. I was a little intimidated by that. The thought of calling people up and asking them to donate to the campaign. I don't want to ask people for stuff, but it takes money. It takes money to get your message out and to remind people to go vote and to remind them that, "Hey, I am the sheriff. I'm doing a good job. So, I need you to see this mailer or this document, and that all costs money." And, in Florida, at least, I think it's a little bit easier route for the incumbent sheriff because of the name recognition, because I've been around for so long.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you have to go on courses to learn how to do campaign finance and all that stuff?

John Mina:

I didn't take any courses, but there is a learning curve. And, it's all right there in writing in state law. You have to become versed in all that. So that's what the campaign manager will help you. They know all the rules and they help guide you through that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You buy them in as a service.

John Mina:

Correct. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Fascinating. You haven't had anybody run against you from within your own agency, but I've seen that with other sheriffs. I can't imagine what it'd be like to have somebody who works for you trying to become the sheriff over you. That must be the weirdest thing.

John Mina:

It is. And I've watched that with some of my fellow sheriffs. And, I will definitely say that is a more difficult thing to navigate, because you think about that person's on the inside, they're privy to all the emails that are going out, all of the crime stats that are going out right at their fingertips. They know what the agency's maybe lacking, what are our challenges, what we have done that maybe they want as an opponent, put that out there and highlight that, "Hey, you probably didn't know that sheriff is doing this or they failed in this particular thing."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But afterwards, I can't imagine what the relationships are like within the agency.

John Mina:

So, I've seen it both ways, where someone from the inside actually wins and becomes sheriff. And then, I've seen it where what'll happen is if they actually file for office, then they'll be removed from the sheriff's office. The sheriff has a right to do that. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. If somebody runs against you and they lose, you can actually get rid of them.

John Mina:

No, even before they lose. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, wow. Okay.

John Mina:

Yeah, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you don't have to get them to take a flight across Russia after.

John Mina:

No. But I have seen agencies where the incumbent sheriff was beaten by someone from within. And then, all those people who backed the incumbent sheriff, they're never long. The command staffs change, and it could be different for the agency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Ah, this is some Game of Thrones shit really then taking place.

John Mina:

Yes, exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my goodness. Well, fortunately, you've not had this experience, but that must be devastating just for the morale within the agency.

John Mina:

Yeah, I think so, because then, a lot of people within the agency, they get turned off. A lot of them, they don't want to get involved in the politics. They're like, "Hey, I love you. I love him. But I don't want to get involved and I just want to stay neutral." I would say that's what most people do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's probably the smart play.

John Mina:

Yeah, and I don't blame on one bit.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No. This is fascinating, because it's a unique role. You are directly at the whim of the public. Are there benefits to that?

John Mina:

There is. And there's an old saying that chiefs and sheriffs talk about that I run for my job every four years. A chief is really running for their job every day.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, it's brutal.

John Mina:

Every single day. And we've seen that. A chief with just six months or a year on for whatever reason, things go south and then they're gone.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. I mean, you feel like most police chiefs, especially in the U.S., but I think increasingly anywhere, everybody has one bad use of force case away from unemployment.

John Mina:

Correct. Yeah. So, one of the advantages of being an elected sheriff is, say, God forbid, I did have one of those critical incidents that made national news, where maybe we weren't at our best. Well, I might not be up for re-election for another three years. Sheriffs basically can ride that out, and be transparent, and accountable to the public. And, chances are, if that sheriff is doing a good job, they'll move on from that one incident. Give the sheriff the benefit of the doubt and re-elect him or her.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've got a bit of time to win back their trust and let them see that this isn't how we operate all the time. It also strikes me that when you've got a longer time window like that, that you don't have to be as reactionary. That I see a lot of police departments, "Oh, we had a spike in vehicle theft." So they set up a vehicle theft squad. And now, you're stuck with a vehicle theft squad for years at some point, because nobody wants to ever disband anything, right? It seems like you can put more sensible longer term initiatives in.

John Mina:

That's exactly right. You do not have to be as reactionary. You can really be like, "Let's wait this out. Is this really a problem? Do we really need that unit?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's the downside?

John Mina:

The downside of being sheriff? I haven't found one yet.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you're living your life. You're in Florida. You've got Disneyland down the road. This is great. You're making this a really good advert for the job.

John Mina:

Yeah. I was just telling a chief the other day that a lot of city municipal police chiefs, they do come to me for advice, because they're thinking about that change and a lot of them are hesitant. I tell them the same things I tell you, "You have the autonomy and the independence to accomplish the things that you want to accomplish."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Would it be harder if you were living somewhere or working somewhere with a civilian population who is a little bit more extremist? In some places, people can be a little bit more extreme on the political extremes. Do you think that makes the job harder?

John Mina:

I think it could, if you didn't have those same views.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It can't be easy to do things that you know work in terms of policing or law enforcement that aren't necessarily labor of the month with the electorate.

John Mina:

That's correct. I know I said this before that you're going to make a number of people on both sides unhappy. And, I always found, for whatever reason, because of my views and the far right doesn't really care for you or the far left sometimes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Well then, you're probably doing something right, because that's going on. I can say that.

John Mina:

The majority is in the middle and I think are like me. And, I don't like when people try and box me in because of my party. I'm going to vote. I'm going to have an opinion on what I believe is right, not because I have to be a registered democrat and elect as a democrat.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Has your relationship with the media changed? Because, I can imagine when you work for a mayor, the mayor is going to want to do a lot of the front media stuff. But now, you are just your own guy. So, do you have to do more media stuff?

John Mina:

Yes and no. So, it's funny you say that, because I do remember when I was the police Chief in Orlando, it seemed like the good initiatives went to the mayor. They're like, "Hey, this is what we're doing in the City of Orlando."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They opened up this rec center.

John Mina:

And then, the bad fall on the police, which is fine.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's fine, but it's not.

John Mina:

When I was the police chief in the city, I would get requests by the media for certain stories that I knew it was going to be a negative story. It was going to put us in a negative light. And, I'd say, "That's just a got you story. I'm not doing that." So what they would do, they were smart, the media. They would just go to the mayor and they're like, "Mayor, we want you to do this interview." And he'd be like, "No." Then they would call over to the police department like, "Hey Chief, you got to do that interview." So, being sheriff, if I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it. But, I've always found that I've been comfortable in front of the media. I want to be open and transparent.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When it comes up to election season, do you find running for election when you ran for election, you're going to be running for election again later in the year. Is it time-consuming? Does it distract from actually having to run the agency? I mean, it must be exhausting, isn't it?

John Mina:

It doesn't seem like it, because-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Kujo, calm down.

John Mina:

... Oh.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He saw a fish, and he's just loving it.

John Mina:

So, just the regular day-to-day activities of the sheriff keep you busy, because you're the elected sheriff of that county, there's all kinds of events that people want you at. So, you're doing that anyway year round. Now, I will say, that as it

gets closer to election, you tend to go to a lot more of those events, even on the night times and the weekends. So, it can be a little bit exhausting, but it doesn't take away from running the sheriff's office.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, how's it been coming to the IACP meeting? Is it similar or do you find a lot of the sessions just don't have the same resonance for a sheriff as they would do for a municipal police chief?

John Mina:

It's very similar. So, I found that the same issues that a police chief is dealing with here in California are the same issues that a sheriff in Florida is dealing with. And that's recruitment retention, spikes in violent crime, and more and more people carrying guns, homelessness, mental health issues, officer wellness. We're all dealing with the same thing, so it doesn't matter if you're a sheriff or a chief. That's what's so great about the IACP conferences, because there's definitely sessions and classes for everyone, and you can learn something from every single one of them. The only bad thing is you don't have enough time to go to all of them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So, what's next? Going to start gearing up for re-election at some point? You're going to do it again?

John Mina:

Yes. I'm definitely going to run again. A lot of people ask me if I'm going to run for higher office and I have no interest in being a mayor or other politician.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you're still disgracefully young.

John Mina:

I'm still young. I am. But I do enjoy being the sheriff in Orange County. And people always ask me, "Well, how long are you going to stay?" And I said, "As long as I'm having fun." I still wake up every single day when I put the uniform on. I like the meaningful work that we talked about and having that mission of keeping our community safe. And I always say that "Well, I'll stay as long as I'm having fun. And as long as I can do the things that my deputies can do, as long as I can go out and arrest someone, as long as I can go out and chase someone on foot, and I'm not old and broken down, I'll continue to do it."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good stuff. Because I'm obviously English originally, and then coming to the States, this whole sense of what a sheriff is complete mystery. This has been a real insight. It's been great. Yeah, it's been fun. John, thanks very much indeed. I appreciate it.

John Mina:

You're welcome.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 72 of Reducing Crime recorded in San Diego in October, 2023. Did you know that you can subscribe to Reducing Crime at Spotify, SoundCloud, Apple, or just about wherever? I know, right? Transcripts and multiple-choice questions for every episode are available for instructors. Just DM me @_reducingcrime on Twitter for details. Don't forget the underscore. Be safe and best of luck.