

#56 (VERA BUMPERS)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

Reducing Crime is all about conversations with influential thinkers in the police service, and leading crime and policing researchers. Vera Bumpers is the police chief for the Houston Metro Transit Authority Police Department. She served as the president of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives and is this year's winner of the Woman Law Enforcement Executive of the Year Award. We talk about mentorship, community outreach, and her role encouraging other women in policing.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Welcome to Reducing Crime, I'm Jerry Ratcliffe.

My guest this month is the irrepressible Vera Bumpers. For more than 30 years, Vera has served with the Metro Transit Authority Police Department in Houston, Texas, amassing firsts throughout her career. She was the first woman in the department, and both the first woman and the first African American to achieve every rank in the organization.

Chief Bumpers has served as the national president of NOBLE, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, is on the board of trustees for the IACP and served on their women's issues task force. She's also an active member of the NAACP. One of her top career priorities has been advancing opportunities within policing to other women and minorities. She has a national reputation as a mentor and a coach for other women within policing.

She holds a bachelor's in criminal justice, an MA in education, and graduated from the FBI National Academy. Locally, Vera serves as a commissioner on the Commission Against Gun Violence, chairs the Houston Community College Police Academy Advisory Board, and is a board member for the Houston Recovery Center. She also participates in a plethora of local community outreach programs. Seriously, she would make Mother Teresa feel like an underachiever.

I sat down with Vera at the IACP annual conference in Dallas, Texas, where she had just won the Woman Law Enforcement Executive for the Year Award from the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives, also known as NAWLEE.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Family is everything, right?

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, it is. I tell the officers that all the time. I say, "Do not put anything before your family."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wellness is such an important thing these days, isn't it?

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's the thing that's been changed since the murder of George Floyd, and it's just everybody's working hard. How's it been with the Metro Transit Police?

Vera Bumpers:

Well, I want to say it's been good, and that's because I try to stay engaged and pay attention. I guess one of the things that I look at is if we have people wanting to leave and we don't.

My retention has been good and we're still hiring. When I interview people, I always ask, "Why did you choose this department?" They will normally say, "I heard good things. The officers say they like it. My friend works here and they love working here."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There you go, that's it. You're winning right there, aren't you?

Vera Bumpers:

I'm winning. I'm winning. That's why I feel comfortable saying I think it's going good.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I've been doing research for the last couple of years with the SEPTA Transit Police in Philadelphia. They see city police, they see municipal police departments. I don't think they appreciate sometimes what a tough job transit policing really is.

Vera Bumpers:

I agree.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How much community policing's involved, because I'm working in Kensington, and you have a whole community that lives in the transit system.

You maybe don't want them to be in the transit system, but I've seen cops who are on first name terms with everybody in that station.

Vera Bumpers:

They know them. They know them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's real community policing, and I don't think people appreciate that about transit policing as much as they should.

Vera Bumpers:

You're right, and you see it because our customers are on the move. We're not going to a house, driving through neighborhoods. We have customers who are utilizing our system from all over Houston, and so everybody's different.

I think you have to make sure that officers are comfortable no matter who it is, treating people with respect, treating people right. That doesn't have anything to do with the community they come from, but it's just being comfortable.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's across policing, isn't it?

Vera Bumpers:

It's across policing, but just being comfortable. No matter who you are, I'm treating you like a person, I respect you. You give respect and you get respect. I just think that we have a unique situation. I always say we're specialized police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

See, it's quite fascinating. You've been there, I don't want to age you because you look like a 30-year-old, but you've been there 35 years, haven't you?

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, 35 plus now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes, that's fantastic.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, I have.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If I read correctly, you were the first woman to achieve every single rank in the department.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Whenever you achieved a new rank, you were the first woman there every single time.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, I was.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

In a way, that's wonderful and congratulations. But honestly, it's a bit of an indictment of policing as well, isn't it?

Vera Bumpers:

It is. It is, but you know what? I like to look at it as a positive, saying that even though I was the first, it really doesn't matter unless there are numbers following me. It could have been indictment, but the fact that I look back now and there's so many women who are coming in this profession and moving up the ranks.

Not just my department but other departments, and it's good to see. I think we could focus on why did it take so long? It's 2022, but if we just say, "Let's just celebrate those small victories," and that's what I choose to do. We can't change the past and life doesn't come with any eraser. But what we can say is, "You know what? We're on the right trajectory now. Let's make the most of it."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are we on the right trajectory? No, come on. It feels painfully slow so absolutely.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. You think it's slow?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hell, yeah.

Vera Bumpers:

If you think about it, what can we do about it? We're working toward it, it's slow. This is a Titanic we're turning around, but if we don't project that positivity and that optimism to the officers. To say it's all of our responsibilities to make sure we try to bring diverse people into this organization now.

It's not mine, it's officers, so these are the people you'll be working with. It's just as much your responsibility to go out there and promote the profession, promote your organization, and to be positive about it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Vera, you're the perfect guest to have on the podcast because you are a glass more than half full. I've been in policing now 38, nearly 39 years in some fashion now, and I'm a miserable bastard so you are perfect to have here. Oh my goodness.

Vera Bumpers:

I don't think you're miserable, I think you just may say that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just spend five more minutes with me, trust me. No, but I remember thinking back in England, in East London in the mid 1980s, and I thought the women make a really good contribution. They really are doing perfectly good at this job, if not better, certainly than I was as a 19-year-old.

Yet we're still only in the United States, up to what, 13% of law enforcement are women? In leadership positions, you guys all know each other pretty much on first name terms, right?

Vera Bumpers:

First name basis, yeah. I get excited every time I see a woman that ascends through the ranks to chief or assistant chief.

If I see it in the media, I always post it on LinkedIn, "Congratulations." They don't know me and I don't really know them, but I'm celebrating you from afar.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Come on, people know your name. I mention Vera Bumpers, everybody knows your name.

Vera Bumpers:

Well, I celebrate them because I'm like, "I'm excited. We have another person who's rose through the ranks and worked hard to get there." But you're right, I know it's a slow turn, but I do try to celebrate the positives and the victories.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're involved in the 3530 initiative, and you were here with NAWLEE, and you had a breakfast this morning.

Vera Bumpers:

No, it was yesterday.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yesterday. Let everybody know what NAWLEE is.

Vera Bumpers:

National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Why were you at the breakfast?

Vera Bumpers:

I was awarded the 2022 Woman Law Enforcement Executive of the Year.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thoroughly well deserved.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes. I'm so humbled and honored, because that's a selection that's done by your peers. To be selected by my peers is definitely an honor, and I'm humbled by it and definitely appreciate it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's like a People's Choice Award, isn't it?

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, it is. It is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good, that's fantastic. You've got yourself a reputation as being very much a mentor to other people.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you just fall into that? Was it something you actively chose? What do you get out of it?

Vera Bumpers:

I celebrate when I see the women, who whether I know I'm mentoring them or I don't, or just maybe I say something that is inspirational to them, I just get excited to see that something click and that it factor.

They, "Wow. Yeah, let me keep it moving." I always tell people, if you think you can leave and go to somewhere perfect, don't go because you're not perfect, and you'll mess it up if it is perfect.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. Stop complaining, stick around and fix it.

Vera Bumpers:

Stick around and fix it. Just to see people who I maybe just again, said a word to or have been aggressively talking to on a consistent basis to ascend through the ranks, it's just exciting for me. That's what I get out of it. I do believe that we're all on this earth for a purpose.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my goodness, you are.

Vera Bumpers:

I am and you are too. What you're doing is a positive. I do think that hearing from different leaders, and that's why it's one of the things I said at the breakfast.

I am so thankful that those who have retired, still come back to pour into those who are trying to ascend to the seat.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's hard to explain to people who are not in policing and I think people join policing for many different reasons.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, I agree.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I think if you go to some of the smaller departments in very rural places, you know what? You join policing because there are no other jobs in town. The Walmart shut down, the factory shut down.

There may not be anything else, but I think for a lot of people in the job, wherever you are, and I've worked in El Salvador to New Zealand, it really is a calling.

Vera Bumpers:

It's a calling.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When people abuse that and do things that are wrong, cops are the best for calling out bad policing.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, they hate it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They absolutely are because they're in it for the calling.

Vera Bumpers:

Exactly. Because I always tell people, when you do something that tarnishes our brand, this is our brand, so it affects more than just you. It affects your family, it affects your coworkers, it affects anyone who wears a patch that says police.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Didn't we see that with George Floyd? Not only were we seeing protests obviously in Minneapolis, we saw protests across the country, we saw protests in other countries.

What does that tell you about the effect of shitty policing, I mean God awful policing? A murder over eight, nine minutes, and how that affected how people thought about this whole profession worldwide.

Vera Bumpers:

That's why you saw leaders doing things like coming out immediately, we're looking at our policies. You saw leaders taking a knee. You saw leaders sending a message to their department saying, "This is what we will not do." I sent out an email to my department, and I called, I said, "In my opinion, this was a murder, and I wanted you to know where we stood." But I also realized that Chauvin was a field training officer.

I immediately called a meeting with all of my field training officers and said, "What happened was wrong. I want you to know that new trainees that come in, that I will share with them that they have a duty to intervene, so the example you set is important." Then the other thing that I saw is it affects the children. I have a granddaughter and so just to hear, "The police are bad." You remember, everybody used to love the police.

I talked to a young lady who was in Minnesota, who was a sergeant, but she said how it affected her daughter. From that, I sent out an email. Anybody, if you have a daughter or granddaughter that you would like, I'm going to host a dinner just for girls. Several did respond and I hosted a dinner. At the dinner, they dressed up. I had a red carpet, I put a crown, I bought crowns.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my goodness.

Vera Bumpers:

I gave gift bags with Chick-fil-A gift cards and movie gift cards. I had a lot of donations.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Chick-fil-A, you can't go wrong.

Vera Bumpers:

You can't go wrong. I had dessert to a very nice, five-star restaurant. They had a full course meal. I wanted to talk to them, I said, "How do you feel about your parent being in law enforcement or your grandparent?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Sure.

Vera Bumpers:

Just to hear some of their responses it was very interesting. I just shared with them just how proud we were of them serving and protecting in the communities in Houston. Now parents are like, "They want to know where else you're taking them, when are we going to do it again?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my goodness, now you've started a thing.

Vera Bumpers:

Right, but I knew it was because of that situation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Obviously, being in Philadelphia, it's a very diverse city. I've spoken to a lot of police officers, the negative backlash was bad on policing, but it was particularly bad on the Black police officers. Especially for them from their own families, which I think they really struggle with. I think it's eased off a bit but only the passage of time.

But I'm still going on ride-alongs and I'm still doing walk-alongs. I'm working with the Philly cops and other cops, I was just down in Norfolk, Virginia. It's eased, but it's not better.

Vera Bumpers:

It's not better.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They haven't forgotten. How has that been because you obviously have a lot of Black cop officers working for you?

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. Yeah. For me, it's about communicating. We have to talk about it. It's an elephant in the room for a lot of people. They get uncomfortable when we start talking about.

Because when we take the blue uniform off, a lot back in the day you would hear people say, "We're all blue." No, we're not. When we take the uniform off, this is what I do, it's not who I am. I live in the community just like anybody else.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Being Black and blue is incredibly tough.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, it is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

To this day.

Vera Bumpers:

But we have to talk about it. We have to talk about it in the community, we have to talk about it inside our departments. I know a lot of times officers say, "Here we go again." When you think back Rodney King, "Okay, we're right back there again." With Rodney King, it was culture diversity. Now, because of what happened with Chauvin, now we're focused on implicit bias. Are there biases that you know nothing about? Again, it's just a work in progress that we just have to keep working at it.

I don't know if it'll ever be perfect, but as you have new recruits come in, I think it starts at that academy level, sharing and talking. Of course, like I said, I'm a Black female, I have a Black son, a Black daughter. Of course, I have those conversations with them. I'm not immune to it, none of us are just because we wear the uniform. But I still think that if we share with our coworkers, they don't know. This is what's going on in our community.

These are the conversations we have in our home about law enforcement. Because I guarantee you, many officers will hear the negativity from even their family members of law enforcement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I know. It's tough. It's tough. As somebody who's been a mentor and you've been doing this for, don't age you, but for a few years, like we said.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. Yeah, a lot of years.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I know you've moved up in ranks, but are the sorts of things that you are helping, especially, you've got a very strong position helping women in policing.

Vera Bumpers:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are the sorts of problems and issues that women are dealing with, have these changed over the decades? Are there some things that are now settled? Yeah, what's changed?

Vera Bumpers:

Well, one thing's changed is that now we have EEO.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

For those outside the United States, EEO is what?

Vera Bumpers:

Equal employment opportunity.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thank you.

Vera Bumpers:

But under that falls you cannot discriminate or you cannot harass. We talk a lot about that where we didn't have those avenues to go talk to somebody if we felt we were being sexually harassed or discriminated.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Some young women, they have no idea what it was like back in the day, do they?

Vera Bumpers:

They have no idea. They have no idea.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I keep telling my students, I remember life before the internet, and they just stare at me like I'm an alien.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes. Employees, we didn't have employee assistance, employee relations, now there's so many different areas. Now you have the diversity, equity, inclusion, we didn't have anything like that. They're making sure departments are looking at policies, what we're doing, making sure we're doing it right.

That we are sensitive to some of the issues that may be confronted to employees based on race, gender. You didn't have, like last year I think it was, I appointed someone as my LGBTQIA liaison. We didn't have that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No. I think you forgot the plus. I think there's a few more characters in there, I can't keep up.

Vera Bumpers:

I can't either, but that's why.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Much love to everybody in that community but man, it's getting complicated.

Vera Bumpers:

One of the reasons, that's why you have somebody so we can make sure we're saying it right and doing it right. "Okay, is this right?" So they can help educate us.

I think that's a good thing that departments have someone who's a liaison, to make sure that we are not being offensive to anyone and we're serving everybody again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are we doing enough? Are we doing it right for women in policing?

Vera Bumpers:

I think that we can do more, and I think we need to do a better job of educating the men we work with.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's right.

Vera Bumpers:

We have all these conferences for women.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're saying that we're not perfect?

Vera Bumpers:

But we need to make sure the men understand this is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's a job for life.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. Then we need to make sure that they are a part of helping us recruit this 30% by 2030.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yes.

Vera Bumpers:

We need them to help us. We can't do it alone if we're just 13% of us. We need you all to be right alongside of us saying, "Hey, we agree, we need more women in this profession."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yet you look at places like New Zealand where they've got recruit classes that are 50/50 now on a regular basis.

Vera Bumpers:

That's awesome.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Vera Bumpers:

That is awesome.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're doing it right.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah, they're doing it right. LAPD, they did a presentation and they were talking about how their numbers of women recruits have increased. That's definitely something to celebrate and applaud.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What things can agencies do? Because I still run into around here, you can still run into agencies with 30, 40 people.

They have a token woman just so they don't get sued for not having any women pretty much. Do you know what I mean? It's like, "Oh, really? Is that where you are? Come on."

Vera Bumpers:

I think that...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What can we do to get them into this century?

Vera Bumpers:

This conference, NAWLEE Conference, all these conferences, I say leaders come to these conferences, I believe, to do what I call sharpen your servant skills.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay, so explain what that means.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. What that means, just like yesterday when I went to listen to LAPD talk about what they're doing, there were tons of chiefs, assistant chiefs in that room. It was standing room only. These people are listening and taking notes hopefully, and saying, "Okay, that makes sense. Maybe we can do that."

"How do we get more women recruits? How do we get more engaged with the community?" They're doing some fabulous things in LA, their community outreach and programs they have, and they shared all that. We can't hoard information. When we find something that works, we have to share it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But we have to also test these things to see if they're really working.

Vera Bumpers:

If they're really working, that's true.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because we have to start dumping some stuff that isn't working.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. Sometimes we are data-driven too. We can get so far up...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not as often as we want to be I think, but we are getting there.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. Yeah, we are. Yeah. You're right, we're getting there. But I think sometimes if we only have two people, two women here, "Okay, you have two, we're working to get more."

Instead of harping on the two, just harping on just two, just two, now we're working toward getting more. We've not stopped, don't think we're just going to stop at two.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think that things like union contracts hinder this kind of stuff? I often think about the inflexibility of union contracts when you want to maybe try and give people flexible working hours around childcare and these things.

Which though they shouldn't, traditionally and still traditionally fall predominantly on women to deal with. Do we need to do more in terms of being flexible around contracts?

Vera Bumpers:

I think it depends on the city you're in, because not all, we don't have contracts, only the union.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You don't have a contract?

Vera Bumpers:

We don't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You don't?

Vera Bumpers:

No, no, we're not civil service. Just the departments that do, I think that the union membership should tell their executive board, "We want you to make this a part of your negotiating that women have opportunities, that they're on light duty for pregnancy, that they have some opportunities."

LAPD talked about that, how they came up with giving them pregnancy uniforms and putting them in different divisions while they're waiting to go out.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Physical fitness in policing isn't great. There's a couple of men around who might benefit from those uniforms.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. No.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's a couple of guys who wouldn't pass a fitness test these days, let's face it.

Vera Bumpers:

Maybe they're light on their feet, that's all I want to say.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

He moves quick for a big lad.

Vera Bumpers:

They might be light on their feet, I'm going to say that. Maybe they're working toward it. That's a part of our wellness. We want everybody to be healthy and all of us can do better with our eating habits, keeping our stress levels down.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I just want to know how you start that conversation, "Would you like a pregnancy uniform?" Oh my goodness.

Vera Bumpers:

No. We would definitely be sent to, they would go to employee relations or somewhere to file on us if we did that. There would definitely be some discriminatory remarks. But we just want to encourage, and sometimes that can be done through peer pressure too.

Leadership doesn't have to do it. Your coworker, your partner might say, "Hey, I want you to be healthy. I enjoy working with you. Let's work out." It may just need some encouragement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You've got EEO and that stuff now. What are the things that people need help within the mentorship side now, that they need now they haven't in the past?

Vera Bumpers:

I think to be open, for somebody to be open. For years, I know when I came along, you wouldn't dare walk up to a chief and say hi. You just wave from afar and there wasn't a lot of conversation back then.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wave, you wouldn't even make eye contact.

Vera Bumpers:

You wouldn't even make eye contact. But now again, when I see chiefs, assistant chiefs, majors, captains, we've taking the time to stop and have a conversation in the hallway with someone and willing to give advice, guidance. I just think that means the world, because here, even though the training is excellent here, but some of the conversations, the networking is powerful. Sometimes the other thing, it's not always about work.

Somebody could be having a situation where they're having marital issues, childcare issues, children issues, and they just may need your example of, "Okay, how did you navigate this?" My spouse, I work nights and my spouse is getting frustrated because they have to do all the stuff with the kids. How do I navigate that? They could be talking to somebody that said, "This is how it worked for me."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is almost an argument, not for specialist mentorship, but this is almost a broader argument for mentorship in policing more generally, we should just do more mentorship with good people.

Vera Bumpers:

More mentorship, yes, and make sure that it's balanced. Because sometimes work can be so consuming that it affects your personal life and vice versa. Your personal life things can start happening and be so consuming, that now it's affecting my work life. Most departments now definitely have psychologists on staff. A lot of the larger ones do, but we have employee assistance programs. You can be referred out.

A lot of departments are doing some outstanding things around the wellness part where they're bringing in the yoga. They're showing they care about your wellbeing because we feel like a mentally healthy and physically healthy officer is not only good for the department, but for the community that we serve.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Not just mentoring women I think is really important, but also, especially even we only have 3%, 4% of leaders in policing in the United States are women. But the number of Black women in those leadership positions is tiny, it's absolutely tiny.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah, it is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is there a different mentoring process for Black women?

Vera Bumpers:

I don't think so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because obviously, I'm in Philadelphia and I've spoken with Danielle Outlaw and it's tough in Philadelphia for Danielle, it's tough in Philadelphia for everybody right now. We're coming up on the record number of homicides to this year.

Carmen Best obviously had an exciting time in Seattle. It feels like the expectations are almost so high for Black women especially, it's almost insurmountable, isn't it?

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah. You do feel it because there's two things that you are working from, female and Black. I believe when I say mentoring shouldn't be different, mentoring is mentoring.

Which when you are committed to pouring in to someone, that may just mean encouraging them. That's what I mean by that. But we have to find a way as women, even Black women, to do a better job of supporting each other.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I saw Carmen Best yesterday and just her joie de vivre is infectious, isn't it?

Vera Bumpers:

Yes. She's just like so happy right now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh my goodness. Yeah.

Vera Bumpers:

No phone calls at two in the morning.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because when the phone goes at two in the morning, it's never good. It's never somebody on the other end saying, "Sorry to wake you, Chief, but everything's great."

Vera Bumpers:

Right. Right. Right. I was talking to a young lady, she's an assistant chief, and she said, "I've got late night phone calls every day I've been here. She said, "I'm trying to tell them I'm in Texas. I'm trying to enjoy the conference." But it goes with the territory. I always tell people, you go with the zeroes.

That's why you add extra zeroes, that's what it goes with. But I think if we can do a better job of being encouraging to each other, because if you think about it, chiefs and leaders, we're always encouraging everybody else. Who encourages us? Who pours into us?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Yeah. It's almost that the only encouragement you need is, "Well, you've still got a job."

Vera Bumpers:

You've still got a job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because the job tenure is laughably short in policing. You know what I mean?

Vera Bumpers:

At a chief's level. Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It feels like everybody is one bad shooting away from unemployment.

Vera Bumpers:

Right. Sometimes you're blamed for something that somebody else did.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's brutal, isn't it?

Vera Bumpers:

It's just brutal and then that's your legacy. That's your career now that you've given somebody else control over the narrative how you go out in this profession. Sometimes it just seems so unfair. Eventually everybody blames the chief for bad decisions of an officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's horribly unfair.

Vera Bumpers:

It's horribly unfair.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because you're getting blamed for a decision of an officer that you didn't train.

Vera Bumpers:

You didn't train them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You didn't hire, you didn't supervise.

Vera Bumpers:

You had expectations for it to be done right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Vera Bumpers:

That was the mandate you put out there. You saw they have the policy, they have the guidelines. Your expectations was they did the right things were done in the academy, right things done in the field training program. But when they derail, you're blamed for it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. I worry that we'll end up with people taking on the chief's position, they're going to end up being horribly risk-averse and just not take any risks. When you're not taking risks, you're not trying new things.

Vera Bumpers:

Not being innovative.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You're not big innovative, you're not trying different ways of recruiting.

Vera Bumpers:

Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I was hoping that Evidence-Based Policing and trying new things would expand more quickly in the United States than it has. But I also understand that I would come to you as a chief and say, "We'd like to try some different ways of trying recruiting, and we'll find out whether they work or not."

I'm sure as chiefs, they're thinking, "If you find it doesn't work, that could be really bad for me. It could be career damaging." What we've gotten, is it feels like post George Floyd is everybody's so risk-averse, we're just failing conventionally, if we're going to fail at all because nobody wants to take a risk. Everybody's horribly risk-averse right now. Am I wrong?

Vera Bumpers:

You're right. Everybody has a boss. I always say everybody has a sergeant. You have all these people are here, but is your boss here? Is the chief's boss here? The mayor, the city manager, the assistant city manager, when are they educated on?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're not.

Vera Bumpers:

They're not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

They're not. They hold everybody's career in their hands and they don't know a damn thing about this job.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I love IACP and I think this is a fantastic meeting, and the organization, they are great, but I almost feel like we're preaching to the choir.

Vera Bumpers:

We're preaching to the choir.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We need to start dive-bombing into the city and county manager's association, and the mayor's meetings and saying, "This is how it is."

Vera Bumpers:

Have a track here for them.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, but it's so easy just to throw the police chief under the bus.

Vera Bumpers:

It is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Get another police chief.

Vera Bumpers:

It is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's as if the slate's wiped clean. But I don't think the community, they don't fall for it I don't think.

Vera Bumpers:

A lot of the behind the scenes they really don't know, I don't think. You only put out there what you want them to know. I think sometimes if they really knew the whole picture, they would maybe speak up more and say, "This is not the chief's fault."

But I don't know, everybody we say transparency. We say we want to be our authentic selves. We want to be transparent, we want you to know what we're doing, but do we really want that? Do we want the scrutiny?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Transparency is a really interesting one. As we move to more open data and people can see data more often, there are some people who use data in really positive ways. People like Jeff Asher that will put nuance on the data.

You can read their articles in the New York Times or inbox, that actually explains the complexity of modern policing. But your average city newspaper, I've never seen them use more of the data we give them in any positive way. It's always used as a hit-and-run.

Vera Bumpers:

A hit-and-run, that's it. They're looking for the negative, that's what sells news. If your numbers are looking good, "We don't want that, but why is your numbers drop here?" It's almost like they're looking for that got you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm almost intrigued to say we're not releasing this data because it needs too much understanding of context to understand the data, but I don't know.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah, but most agencies now are posting it on their website. But I think the only time you can really get to delve into explanations, is when you go to community meetings.

During COVID, I think that hurt us because we weren't going to face-to-face. Nobody was getting on Zoom because they were Zoomed out, so I think now we're trying to catch up again.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, half the trouble with going to face-to-face meetings nowadays, I've got to keep putting trousers back on.

Vera Bumpers:

That's true. That's true.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

For Zoom, I could get away with it.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah, that's true. That's true.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I was wearing my shorts and my pajamas.

Vera Bumpers:

I've gotten real comfortable so now I don't want to do that anymore. Just like every place, how do we get people back? We want to hold these meetings and you get even three or four people.

I looked at National Night Out, years ago, everybody would come out. It has changed. I really thought to myself, "Is there really an impact doing National Night Out because people aren't coming? They're not coming out."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a really good question and I hate to be a naysayer, but I did warn you when we first started.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah, you warned me. You warned me.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Being a cynic, to some degree, I'm channeling a British commander called Alex Aria, a deputy chief constable now, but I want people to do less in some regards. I want us to do less of the things that don't work and more of the things that do, but we don't know yet.

We see a lot of investment in things like National Night Out and these athletic leagues. I hope they work, but I can't tell you they work. If you start a police department from scratch, I don't think we're in a great position to tell you all the things where you can save money and not do.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes. Yes. We do our National Night Out in October in Texas, the first Tuesday in October.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What's the weather like then?

Vera Bumpers:

It's not as hot as it is in August. It's still warm.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This is the first night you're not going to desiccate and dehydrate, just go for water on the block.

Vera Bumpers:

Yeah, it's not oven hot.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Did you grow up there, by the way? Is Houston home?

Vera Bumpers:

San Antonio, I grew up in San Antonio.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay, so you are used to that weather.

Vera Bumpers:

I'm used to it. I'm used to it. I went to several National Night Out events and some places it's more police officers than it is community members. It's very few people coming out.

Even people don't know their neighbor like they used to. Maybe COVID may have something to do with it. It was already going in that direction.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You think?

Vera Bumpers:

I think so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The loss of community.

Vera Bumpers:

Loss of community.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's particularly bad in those communities where there's a lot of turnover. People are renting, they're coming in and out.

Vera Bumpers:

In and out, that's it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Of course, there are communities, they're the ones that are often most plagued by violence. I think just a lot of departments are struggling with a whole range of things. As you come back to your work in the transit police system, what are the things that you are seeing?

Vera Bumpers:

Every transit property pretty much is homeless, that's everybody's number one issue how to deal with that. It's not against the law to be homeless.

It's really not a police issue. What we've done is we've hired clinicians, and we team a clinician up with a police officer. A lot of agencies have done that now.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We're actually evaluating it, we've randomized shifts. We've got some shifts, whether it's the officer on their own, and some shifts where it's the officer with the specialist or the clinician.

Vera Bumpers:

Okay. Okay.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We're seeing what the impacts are, in terms of helping to encourage the vulnerable community, because it's not just homelessness, it's opioid addiction and mental health, and alcohol and so forth. Encourage them into treatment and shelter, a lot of police departments are doing it.

Vera Bumpers:

They're doing it, yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But it's still a struggle.

Vera Bumpers:

It is a struggle because a lot of them don't want to go to a shelter, and we see the same ones. It's just a repeat over and over.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's that community everybody's on first name terms.

Vera Bumpers:

Yes. But see, the fact that you have customers using the system, and they want to be able to get on the system without having to sit by somebody who they think may be homeless, or doesn't look like they look or smell like they smell.

What we're trying to educate them is a lot of the social service organizations give them fair median. We can't deny them based on how they look or how they smell if they have fair. We're having to educate the regular riders, "This is some of the issue is that they have fair median."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

If they paid their fair or as you say, somebody's paid their fair for them, I've had officers tell me that they feel some of the social service agencies, especially some of the non-governmental ones, are very well-meaning.

But appear to be almost enabling a continuation of people living in a lifestyle that is unhealthy and not healthy for the economy of the city. Are you experiencing that?

Vera Bumpers:

Yes, we are.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You feel that way too?

Vera Bumpers:

Yes. Goodhearted citizens just coming to those areas where they are gather and just giving them food, giving them money, blankets.

They mean well, and I know what they do, but again, it does not help them get off the streets and it makes the law enforcement job hard.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Is there a solution to that?

Vera Bumpers:

I was talking to somebody a couple of weeks ago and they said, "What can we do?"

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I just threw the \$500 million question at you, if you got the answer to that.

Vera Bumpers:

My response to them was, "Wake up every day and keep trying, we're just going to keep trying." I don't know. There's no answer for that, I don't think. We just keep trying, looking at maybe some other cities that may be doing it.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Bill Brown said to me it's the problem that started in the 1950s with the institutionalization and changes to how we treat people with mental health, and now we are paying a price for it 70 years later, 60, 70 years later.

Vera Bumpers:

That's a very good point. It is our issue so that's why we have to keep trying. Hopefully, if we can get one person off the street. We've had some really good stories that our teams have came back and shared of getting housing for people.

Getting a mother and her son where they ended up homeless here in Houston, they were able to get them a ticket back to a family member. We celebrate those good stories and they come once in a while, but we said, "Okay, that's a good story. May have 10 bad ones, but we got one." We just keep trying.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Your optimism is indestructible, isn't it? It's indestructible, oh my goodness. Even a bitter, old, twisted cynic like me is coming away from this feeling a bit better about the world. I never thought that was possible. What's next for you?

Vera Bumpers:

I'm just going to keep doing what I do. Not in this business, but I think for me, keep trying to share where I can. I always say I'm going to do the I, impact, impart and influence where I can.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, I've got to tell you, it is lovely to meet somebody who's got such a fantastic reputation, and you've stayed in the same agency just doing what you do.

Vera Bumpers:

Doing what I do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This has been absolutely wonderful. Thanks ever such much for spending some time with me.

Vera Bumpers:

Thank you so much.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This has been great, Vera. Thank you.

Vera Bumpers:

Thank you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Are you going to go to the chief's night out tonight?

Vera Bumpers:

No, I'm not.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No?

Vera Bumpers:

No, I'm not going. As a matter of fact, I'm going to go back home. I'm going home. I'm going to catch a flight later tonight.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's a shame. I'm going to go, simply because there's very few times I'm anywhere where I see people wearing cowboy hats and not ironically.

Vera Bumpers:

You were saying you're a cynic. I know you're not a cynic. Well, there's no way you can have a beautiful girlfriend and be a cynic.

I wouldn't stay with any man, I wouldn't be around him if he was negative all the time so I know you're just saying that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

She'll figure me out eventually. But for now, I'm a lucky guy.

Vera Bumpers:

You are.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Thank you so much.

Vera Bumpers:

Thank you so much. Enjoy tonight.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 56 of Reducing Crime recorded in Dallas, Texas in October 2022. New episodes are announced on Twitter @_ReducingCrime. My personal random ramblings can be found @Jerry_Ratcliffe. Don't forget the underscores.

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