

#93 (MIKE POOLEY)

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Jerry Ratcliffe:

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

Mike Pooley is chief of the Apache Junction Police Department and the first Native American leader of a municipal police department in Arizona. We talk about growing up on a reservation, the contrasting challenges of municipal and tribal policing, and the toll the job takes on officers and their families.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I'm Jerry Ratcliffe. This is Reducing Crime. And I'll tell you what folks, this is going to be quite an episode. Mike Pooley grew up pretty much dirt poor on the Navajo Nation Native American Reservation. Before his family moved to the Phoenix area in search of better schooling in the future. Finding his way into policing, he spent over 20 years with Tempe Police Department in Arizona, rising to assistant chief of police. In January 2022, he moved to the Apache Junction Police Department as police chief, where he now runs a department with 125 employees.

Fluent in both Spanish and English, Chief Pooley has bachelor's and master's degrees from local universities and as a graduate of both the Northwestern School of Police Command and SMIP, that's the Senior Management Institute of Policing. He's the first tribal member to be chief of an Arizona municipal police department. But as you'll hear, his journey and that of his family has been quite a rollercoaster. We chatted during the IACP annual conference in Denver, Colorado, where Mike popped over to my hotel and joined me in its coffee shop.

There are two interruptions. First, we have a flying visit from former podcast guest number 79, the delightful Cassi Alia-Ray. And secondly, I managed to pick a coffee shop with the loudest steam wand in Colorado. Yes, it's a steam wand. That's the thing's name. I looked it up.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Your city now is ... I mean, do you consider your city where you grew up or where you're working now?

Mike Pooley:

Well, both. I grew up a little bit up on the Navajo reservation, went to boarding school there. Then it's just a tough life. So my family moved us down to the valley, down to the Phoenix area and grew up in Mesa.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When you were born, you were ... Which reservation were you growing up on?

Mike Pooley:

Navajo. Yeah, a little place called Greasewood. It's in the middle of nowhere. Dirt roads to this day, just absolutely nothing out there. My dad was born and raised out there. Right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What did he do?

Mike Pooley:

Well, his grandpa made kachinas and they would sell kachinas.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Okay. So for my overseas listeners, you better explain what kachinas is.

Mike Pooley:

Oh yeah. So my dad's half Navajo and half Hopi. And a kachina, it's a wooden doll that gets carved by hand. And it represents different deities, I guess. So you have the Alcina, the ogres. As

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Opposed to the Al Pacino then, right?

Mike Pooley:

Yes. Yeah. So yeah, it's not an Al Pacino, it's a kachina.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Got

Mike Pooley:

It. And a lot of times what they believe is these kachinas represent a deity that takes the prayer to the creator.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Mike Pooley:

And so they're very popular in Southwestern United States and Arizona. That's what my grandfather did. And my dad, he always wanted to have a big feed lot. So we had to about a thousand sheep and we used to herd sheep. And my dad would sell the wool for blankets. And so that's what we did when we lived up on the Navajo reservation.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So my honeymoon, for reasons I can't go into, is in Flagstaff. So we actually drove to the Hopi kind of museum. Long drive, middle of nowhere. That is tough land to work, even for sheep.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, I can't imagine you can sustain a huge number of sheep on the land.

Mike Pooley:

No. So it was a tough thing, and it ended up not working out great for my dad, but it was something he wanted to try. And we-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Good for him, but I'm sorry to hear that. Yeah.

Mike Pooley:

Well, we tried. We went to boarding school and we lived in a little trailer and it was my dad and my mom and there were six kids and we lived in this little trailer and we herded sheep and helped my dad and did what we could. But it's a tough life.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Tough days, right?

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. It's a tough life. Education is poor up there. Unfortunately, there's not a lot to do, a lot of substance abuse. And my mom, she just didn't want that life for her kids. So she ended up telling my dad, "We need to get these kids down to the city." And that's what happened. Moved down to Mesa, which is a suburb of Phoenix.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What was it like moving from the reserve? How old are you went then?

Mike Pooley:

I was about 10, 12 years old. It was a big change. I had long hair and I was a chubby kid. I eat a lot of fry bread and I-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Breakfast of champions.

Mike Pooley:

It was a breakfast of champions. It was a huge culture shock because grandma and my uncles and aunts, they all spoke Navajo and we didn't have a lot. It was the same clothes we would wear. And so when I went to the city, it was a big cultural shift. I got made fun of because of my long hair.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When did you start thinking about law enforcement as a career?

Mike Pooley:

I was actually, when we moved down to the city, I would see the police. I never had anybody in my family. There were no relatives whatsoever that were in law enforcement, but I would see them and I just was always kind of drawn to it, the uniform and just the way these officers held themselves. And it just seemed to me as something that was safe and something that was appealing to me because I just thought they protected everybody.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Which is funny because coming as a foreigner coming to the states pick up a lot perceptions and they can often be superficial, but I've often got the perception that the tribal communities often look at law enforcement with suspicion and mistrust, but that doesn't sound like that perception came across to you.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. And I'll credit my parents for that. We grew up very poor, but I feel like I was blessed with more riches than anyone because my parents were so good. And the reason I say that is when I wanted to become a police officer, my dad was very against it and he never talked bad about the police. So it's a lot about how you're raised.

He never talked bad, he never said negative things about the government. He had those feelings, but he never taught us that. He taught us to judge for ourselves and that it was our responsibility to figure out what we wanted to do. So when I told him I wanted to be a police officer, he told me, he said, "Son, I don't want you to be a police officer for one of the reasons I've never told you." And what he said is when he was 16, he went to go pick his grandmother up from the hospital. He left the reservation and he was pulled over by a police officer. Police officer pulled him out, took him to the back of the car and beat him up and said, "Don't ever leave the reservation. This is where you belong. You don't belong out here with us." But he never told me that, never taught us to be afraid of the police, never taught us to hate the police.

But I remember when we moved down to the valley, down to the Phoenix area, I remember he got pulled over in the city of Tempe. And I remember my dad, he was a tough guy and he never cried and never was scared. But I remember when he got pulled over, it was my brother and I, and it was the first time I saw him really kind of intimidated.

And I'll never forget that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That's quite an image, isn't it?

Mike Pooley:

Yes.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Mike Pooley:

And it made sense years later when I told him I wanted to be a police officer and he told me a story. Where I'm at now and seeing the things I saw, there is no doubt there is a very limited trust on tribal communities with law enforcement.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

How does your father now feel about you now with 20 something years in the job and he's seen you rise to become police chief for Apache Junction? Does he feel differently about it? I mean, that's a complicated relationship.

Mike Pooley:

It is. And so we talk about trust building or building ... There are communities, and I tell my guys this and gals, and I tell people that there are many communities that don't trust the police for good reasons. The police have done a disservice in many communities, including in my own family. And there were stories that I've heard that I've learned over the years where the police did abuse their powers. The authority went to their heads and they mistreated the Native American people in many situations. However, what I tell them is there is no doubt you can build a bridge and you can overcome that because I've seen it in my own personal life. My dad now loves every police officer he sees.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Really? Oh, that's smashing.

Mike Pooley:

The reason why is after I became a police officer, my older brother became a police officer. My little sister became a police officer. Several of my cousins and family members have all joined law enforcement at the federal and state, local level. And my dad, every time he sees a police officer, no matter where he's at and doesn't matter what country, he'll always go and talk to the officers and show him a picture of his three kids in uniform. Because he's seen the other

side of what it is. Right. And so there's no doubt that there are communities that don't trust the police, but there is no doubt also that those bridges can be built.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, kudos also to your father because he could have perpetuated that generational mistrust.

Mike Pooley:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And he had good reason to through his experiences, but what a big man to just kind of hold that back and constraint and let you find your way in the world. And now with you and your siblings in law enforcement, that's fantastic. That's a great story.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. And in fact, my dad, he works with almost 400 tribes throughout the United States and he works with men and women that have been incarcerated. And when they get out, it's just redoing their lives. And it's very successful in tribal nations and even up in the First Nations up in Canada all throughout the world, he's actually recognized his organizations recognized by the United Nations. What's

Jerry Ratcliffe:

His organization?

Mike Pooley:

Its called Native American Fatherhood and Family Association.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Great.

Mike Pooley:

And he just had his national conference last week and he actually, for the first time, part of his conference was to recognize police officers and the good that they do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because it would be easy, given what he's doing, especially working with formerly incarcerated folk, because they're going to have some negative stories. I agree with you. He's turning into a bridge across a lot of communities, isn't he?

Mike Pooley:

And a lot of the...

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You know, we could stop the podcast now. That's just like a whole fantastic story right there.

Mike Pooley:

And I'll tell you, a lot of the tribes, they know Pooley family. Whether you're up in New York, all the way down across the country, they know the Pooley story and they know about myself and my brother and my sister and law enforcement and my dad's story. And they understand a lot better of the need of the police in their communities and the need of the police also to recognize that there is this mistrust. There are things that need to be done.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Beyond the mistrust, and it obviously goes back generational for a variety of reasons, but there are also complexities around policing. I mean, you've worked in municipal policing, but you've worked in areas predominantly your career was in Tempe, you came right the way up through assistant chief, if I remember. Yes. And now you're in Apache Junction, which is just a fantastic name for a city, by the way. Absolutely is. It is a lot. When you're from overseas and you only ever saw Western movies, there's an actual place called Apache Jungeon and you're the police chief there. It's so very cool. And like the 12 year old me from Glasgow and Scotland watching this stuff on the television is thoroughly enjoying this. But it's a municipal police with a very small Native American population within the city, but you're surrounded by these tribal lands. There's a complexity there.

Does it make policing harder?

Mike Pooley:

It does. And in Arizona, there's, I believe, 22 recognized federally recognized reservations and there's several that surround the Phoenix metropolitan area. You have the Hila River, you have the Salt River, Pima Maricopa, you have the Fort McDowell and the Tana Atham Nation, which isn't too far from there as well. And you have a lot of tribal members from Navajo, Hopi, Apache that live in the city

And that come down to the city. And there is definitely a disconnect and you know it. I mean, even socioeconomically, once you cross the other side of the street, you know when you're in the reservation, you visibly can see that you are no longer in a city, but the field is also there in policing because there's jurisdictional boundaries. As a municipal or a state police officer, you do not have the authority to go onto the reservation to do any type of enforcement activity. You have to be either a tribal police officer or a federal agent. So the tribes know this, even the tribal members that commit the crimes, they know once they go onto the tribal land, kind of a way to say it is they know they can't be touched. They're untouchable.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

This takes me back almost when the first modern police was formed in 1829 in London. The city burgermeisters lived in the heart of the city of London and they thought there should be a police for everybody else. But what you actually have in the middle is the city of London, its own police one square mile. And back in the 1820s, 1830s, there's

documented evidence of offenders taking advantage of that, jumping back and forwards across the border to commit crime and then escape into the city of London to avoid the very first police. And it continues to this day.

Mike Pooley:

It sure does. It definitely continues, which is why as in law enforcement, we work very closely with our tribal partners and I have an advantage just because I understand it. I've lived it and I do understand it. There are police officers that don't understand that and they think they can go wherever they want and that's what erodes the trust with the tribal

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Nations.

Mike Pooley:

There has to be a respect of those boundaries because it's a law.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Again, because I'm on the periphery of all of this kind of stuff, one of the critiques I often hear is tribal police are often underfunded. This jurisdictional issue, does that work to their benefit or do you think it actually harms the communities? I suppose I'm asking you like slightly political questions here.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. And I'll give you my perspective. The tribal communities, there are a lot of things where the tribal police, the ones that are in the Phoenix area, like Hila River and Salt River, they are very well trained and well funded. They have everything that you would find in Scottsdale, Mesa, Phoenix, Apache Junction. As you get into the smaller communities, yeah, it is a lot different. The training is not as good. The technology is not as good. The funding is not as good. So it does provide a little bit of a disservice when they don't have that connection, especially when you're a victim of a crime. I remember growing up and the police were called, the Navajo police were called when I was little. I remember there was a big fight and the lady had gotten beaten up really bad and her husband was out there and the response time was almost three hours.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, good grief.

Mike Pooley:

And by the time the police got there, everything was calmed down and they didn't want the cops anymore. They're like, "We don't need you. Just get out of here." And all that anger and aggression turned on the officers. That response time in some of these tribal communities is still very similar, could be a couple hours before police arrive on scene.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, this is sounding like my time working with colleagues in parts of rural Australia.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's just hours and hours and hours. You're the only cop out there. Yep. Yeah. Coming from a tribal background, how did that work when you joined policing, working through your career? You chose to move into municipal policing as opposed to working in tribal policing. Was that an explicit decision?

Mike Pooley:

It was. I didn't want to work on the tribes. I was actually, before I was a police officer, I was a teacher for two years and I worked on the reservation as a teacher. I loved the kids and I loved working with my community, but I didn't like how the tribe ran the school. And I didn't want to have that in my profession. So I wanted to try municipal policing. I've been going on 25 years now. In my almost 25 years and being in policing, I have met only a handful, I can't even count on two hands. Other police officers that have been tribal members, unless you go be a police officer on the tribe-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Why'd you think that is?

Mike Pooley:

Mistrust.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Mike Pooley:

They don't find the comfort of joining a city or a state police agency.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Too much of a cultural shift for them.

Mike Pooley:

Cultural shift. And they just find it difficult. It's not appealing. And I think unfortunately, maybe a lot of them have been talked to by their family growing up. Don't join law enforcement

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because- They got what your dad explicitly didn't do.

Mike Pooley:

Exactly.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Mike Pooley:

To this day, I tell him, "Dad, I appreciate you not for getting me jaded and hating the police." He could have and he didn't.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. And so as one of the few tribal members in the police, I bet you were dragged out to appear on every single recruiting post that the department's had for the last 20 years.

Mike Pooley:

I was. I was. I was. I was. I

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Must get a bit old after awhile.

Mike Pooley:

It does. I know in Arizona there's never been a Native American police chief and a municipality.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Hey. Do you guys know each other? Yeah. Oh, lovely. Podcast guest, Kassy. Meet future podcast guests.

Kassy Alia-Ray:

Wonderful. How are you guys. Well, I don't want to interrupt you in the middle of your podcast, but thanks for coming this morning.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah, good job on that.

Kassy Alia-Ray:

Thanks.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You should listen to her podcast episode.

Mike Pooley:

I didn't know you were ... I will find it. Awesome.

Kassy Alia-Ray:

Well, so good to see you guys here. I won't let you guys get back to it. It's good to see you.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Very small world this year. Oh, so we were talking about you being on the-

Mike Pooley:

All the recruiting photos.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The recruiting posters and stuff like that.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Now being a chief, one of the gazillion things you have to do includes recruiting. Do you understand why?

Mike Pooley:

I do. You want your police department to match your community. I mean, it is. There's a big Native American population and it is very difficult to reach that population. And I understand why throughout the years of my experience, they've wanted me to be the poster child. And I don't blame them. Again, going back to my dad, he's one of my heroes and he would always tell me, he's like, "Son, you stand out because of who you are, your blood that runs through you, but don't ever use that as the reason to be the best police chief or the best police officer." That's

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Solid advice. That will just drive resentment.

Mike Pooley:

It does. And I've never wanted to use that. If people ask me, I'll tell them, "Yeah, even across the country, I've never heard of another Native American police chief that's a registered tribal member. I would love to meet one.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. Yeah, you could form your own association, but it can be bloody small.

Mike Pooley:

But I try to just do what is right. But again, I do want my police department to match my community.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

But in Apache Junction, what constitutes your community strikes me as very complicated because obviously I did a bit of research contrary to what most listeners think I actually tried to do a bit of research before I actually speak to people. And you've got a town of 40,000, but it doubles in size in the winter. Does. And you've got this town which is sort of predominantly white, but it's surrounded by this much more heterogeneous population. It's so complicated, the different demographics and the community that changes throughout the year for you.

Mike Pooley:

It is. What I look at is not just Apache Junction. I look at the Phoenix metro area.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, you're about 35, 40 miles outside of Phoenix.

Mike Pooley:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. And coming from the city of Tempe where I spent the majority of my career, it was every race, religion, language that you could think of because of the university, right?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Mike Pooley:

A lot of those same people come through my city, Apache Junction, to go to the lake. It's a huge hiking area.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And you also have the hills, which have got the best name ever. I mean, who wouldn't want to visit the superstition mountains? That's just a great name.

Mike Pooley:

It's a beautiful mountain range called the Superstition Mountains and the Lost Dutchman, State Park and everything there.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah. That complexity, that population, what's that like from a policing perspective?

Mike Pooley:

It is a very calm city. Crime's not very high. Growing up in the valley and the Phoenix area, it has a perception that it's full of drugs and it's not. And I think that's one of the things I battle. Really grown to love the city of Apache Junction. For me, I get defensive when people say, "Oh, it's the meth capital of the world," because it's actually a very safe city. It's got great people and it's just a wonderful place to go.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Your tribal background, have you run into resistance in communities, either in Tempe or in Apache Junction?

Mike Pooley:

Yes, I have.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

There's alive and well. Yeah,

Mike Pooley:

It is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Always going to be. Unfortunately.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. There'll be jokes that come up and I get it. A lot of people, a lot of police officers don't have friends that are native. They don't have neighbors that are native. And when I worked in narcotics years ago, I had a partner of mine, a really good friend of mine, and he said to me one day, and he says, "Mike, I got to tell you, you are the first Native American I've met that's not drunk. It's not an alcoholic." Wow. Because he worked in Phoenix. He was a Phoenix police officer and he worked in an area where any Native American he worked with

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Because

Mike Pooley:

Of where he was at.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. But also policing never exposes us to the best people.

Mike Pooley:

Correct.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

You never get people who are just having a great time. They're in the community, they're doing good work. They're not calling up the cops, "Hey, come on round. Everything's great." Exactly. It's not happening. So there's a massive exposure problem that can fuel some of these misunderstandings.

Mike Pooley:

Correct. And I think that's why it is important for me to help my staff and either other law enforcement really recognize the culture of the natives, especially in Arizona.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

When I started in policing, probably the absolute reverse experience of anything you've had, I was inner city east end of London, but I did a lot of, for the first couple of years, did a lot of foot patrol. And the Gulf between driving a car and foot patrol in terms of your exposure, because when you're on foot, you get to meet and you interact with all these people who are ... Life's tough. East End of London is not an easy place to be, but they're decent people just trying to get by. Raise the kids, maybe go on holiday one day, make sure the kids get a good education, keep their jobs, decent people, but of course they're not interacting with police. Once you jump into a police car and once you're doing response policing, all you meet is people who are not having a good day.

Mike Pooley:

It's exactly true.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you train your police officers to deal with the Native American population differently? Are there techniques, styles, tools that are useful skillsets to have that you might not necessarily need for the white population?

Mike Pooley:

No, I think there's so many cultural sensitivity things to ... And I talk-

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Apparently we have the loudest coffee machine- I was going to say- ... In the whole of Colorado. It's definitely ...

Mike Pooley:

It is very loud. All

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right, there we go. Okay. Sorry.

Mike Pooley:

For me, the bottom line, because I make it a point to go to every one of my work groups, whether you're a civilian, professional staff or a sworn officer, every quarter, I go meet with them. Even when I was in Tempe as the assistant chief, I would go and meet with them every quarter and just give them updates on what's going on and give them a little bit of my own whatever, my own philosophies on policing. And one of the things I have told them is, we can bring in somebody that can teach you about the Hispanic community, the African American community, the Korean, the Chinese, the deaf, the LGBTQ. Bottom line, just respect people.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Mike Pooley:

I don't care where you're from, what color your skin is, what God you believe in, you want to be respected and treated like a good human being.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Even if you're having a really bad day.

Mike Pooley:

Even if you're having

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Really bad- Even if you're the bad guy in this experience, yeah.

Mike Pooley:

It doesn't matter. You just have to be respectful. The very basics that you learn in preschool, treat somebody good. And that was one thing. Again, my dad, he would tell me, he's like, "Son, you're going to meet people in their worst times." And he goes, "Just your job is to be fair." The other thing he would tell me is you need to give human decency to people even in their darkest moment. It doesn't matter what they're wearing or what they smell like or what they've done, give them some human decency. And I've always lived by that and I've really tried to instill that into every one of my employees, whether it was in Tempe or here in Apache Junction.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And that's an exceptionally strong philosophy. This is doable in a department that you have, from an overseas perspective, a very small department within a US perspective, a reasonable size. How many sworn officers do you have?

Mike Pooley:

We have about just under 100.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Just under a hundred. So that's a reasonable size department in the United States. But how have you found going from being an assistant chief in a bigger department to you've got the whole show? You are the buckstop. It all ends with you.

Mike Pooley:

It really is. And it is a big jump. As the assistant chief, I thought I knew what it was to be a chief of police. You don't understand until you become the chief. Everything is on your shoulders, whether it's good or bad, and you are the reason for the decisions that are made. Even if it's at a very low level, it's your decision and you have to be able to be okay with that.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

What advice would you give for a new chief then?

Mike Pooley:

A lot of people are going to do anything and everything you say. When you walk into a room, it's going to change. When you speak, people are going to listen. When you ask somebody to do something, they're going to usually do it. What I would tell them is, "Don't ever let it go to your head."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, I'm sure at some point that can be very fueling for the ego and invigorating, but it comes with the challenges. You could be careful what you say to people then.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. I always know that my position, I could lose my position any day. And I want people to remember me as, not as the chief, but as just another human being that had that position for whatever amount of time I had and I treated them right and that I was competent in my job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Well, we're here at the IACP conference, which is a few presentations, a massive big exhibition hall and some evening activities, should we say?

Mike Pooley:

A few.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Yeah, understood. I had three separate things to go to last night and I tapped out at the last one. But speaking of the conference itself, what do you participate in? What do you find useful? What do you get from it?

Mike Pooley:

There's a lot of different perspectives on policing, a lot of different ideas, and there's a lot of different tools and technologies that are there to help ease the job. But one of the biggest things for me is renewing those relationships and making new relationships with everyone that's here. For me, that's one of the most important things. I don't know what this next year is going to bring. And I remember last year coming to IACP, I didn't know what this past year was going to bring. One of my police officers was shot and killed on a line of duty in June. Oh,

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wow. I'm so sorry.

Mike Pooley:

And it was something for me that I hoped to never experience, but it was a humbling experience, but it also helped me to grow. It was a huge blow to our department, but we're stronger now and we're closer than we ever have been. And we've really tried to share that with other people. And since I've been here, I've had numerous colleagues come up to me and wanting me to share experiences from that specific incident.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

I mean, it's a terrible experience, the worst experience you can have in a police department. Cassie just joined us for a moment there, and she obviously lost her husband when he was on duty. I think there are hugely important lessons. You never want this to happen to any other department, but there are definitely things that you could do to learn to mitigate the pain and the trauma afterwards for everybody in the department. It's a rare experience, but it's a very useful experience, unfortunately.

Mike Pooley:

Yes. And it's something that I'll share for the rest of my career. And even after I've become very close to his family or the family- Who's his name? Gabriel Fasio. And he had been with our department for about four years. You always remember

Jerry Ratcliffe:

The name, isn't it?

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. Yes. Being in a smaller department, I know every one of my staff, and he'd come up to my office and we would talk and he would tell me his story. And he was an immigrant from Mexico and he wanted his whole life to become an American police officer. He moved to the United States and it took him over 20 years to become a police officer.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, good grief.

Mike Pooley:

And unfortunately, four years into his time with the Apache Junction Police Department, he was shot and killed.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

With a small department, this must have been one of the first times it ever happened. It was. He Yeah. The first time.

Mike Pooley:

And the community really came together, but I remember sitting at the hospital with his family one night and his daughter, he has an older daughter that she was getting married in August and she was in tears. And I asked her, I said, "Hey, do you need anything right now?" And she says, "You know, Chief, I just realized that my dad won't be able to walk me down the aisle like he was supposed to." And I ended up telling her that we'll be there for you. And she invited me to her wedding to go be in her wedding party, being there as she's walking down the aisle and just tears are coming to my eyes thinking that I'm a father of three daughters.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So much going through your mind at that time.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah, it was. And I wanted her to feel his presence, but just to know that we were there to support her.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And I don't think people outside, unless it's perhaps military, people don't really understand that these are the kind of things that make policing a family.

Mike Pooley:

Yes, it does. And these can either break a department or really make it a strong department.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

It's a fascinating range of experiences, but you also told me that you've got a couple of siblings who joined policing as well.

Mike Pooley:

I do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Tell me about them.

Mike Pooley:

So I have a brother. He's my older brother by two years. He joined the Tempe Police Department with me a couple months after I did so.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

So you were the experienced guy and he was the rookie, right? Yeah, he was. Yeah. Has two months making a big difference, doesn't

Mike Pooley:

It? And my sister. So her name's Jessica. She's about three years younger than me. We were very close. And she called me and said, "Hey, Mike, I'm thinking about becoming a police officer. What do you think?" And I knew how my sister is. And I told her, I said, "Jessica, you're going to be a great cop, but you got to be careful because this can't be your identity."

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right.

Mike Pooley:

Because I know how she is.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Mike, that's advice that we should give to everybody.

Mike Pooley:

Yes. And I do to this day. You cannot live, eat, breathe, drink being a police officer because it'll kill you. And that's what happened to my sister.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, good God.

Mike Pooley:

And I believe that this job consumed her and she was a very good police officer. She was a police officer for about 15 years, worked as a detective, child crimes, and that really, really impacted her to the point where she dulled her pain by drinking and it got out of control like it does for a lot of our officers. We try to find that escape because you see things and you deal with things that you shouldn't have to in a normal person's life, but you do because that's who we are. And she was in and out of rehab and doctors told her, "If you keep drinking, you are going to die." And she would drink a lot, a couple bottles of wine a night. And on April 30th of 2020, she took her last drink and she was in the hospital and she passed away.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

God, I'm so sorry. How old was she?

Mike Pooley:

She was 35 years old and it was devastating to my mom and dad, to my brother and my sisters

Jerry Ratcliffe:

And- Everybody.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah. Everybody to her husband. Her husband was a police officer as well, a good man. But again, she just would not turn the switch off for becoming ... To just turn it off. And my sister, she always wanted to have kids. She always wanted to be a mom, and she wasn't able to. And when she would see what would happen out on the streets and how kids were getting hurt and abused, and a couple kids that were killed by their parents, by their mom, it was her way of escaping reality was hitting the bottle.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Right. But that's just a devastating part of police work that is necessary-

Mike Pooley:

Absolutely.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

... and important, but just too much.

Mike Pooley:

Throughout my career, I've seen good men and women, good cops that have put a lot of bad people in prison, hurt themselves, whether it was through alcohol, whether it was through suicide, whether it was through losing their families because they gave everything to the job.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Do you think we do enough? One of the things I appreciated of the 21st century policing report is it put officer wellness as one of the key pillars. I feel that we didn't do enough for officers before. I mean, I was a cop in the early 80s because I am that fucking old. And there was nothing. You went to the pub, you talked about the shit that was going on, and that was your therapy, chatting to everybody else in the bar. That's not healthy. I mean, it kind of worked, but it's not healthy. Do you think we do enough for officers now?

Mike Pooley:

There's a lot that gets done, but not enough.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Certainly better.

Mike Pooley:

It is certainly better. And every department's different. I do believe that there's a lot more being done. We need to do an even better job. And it got to start, not just at the chief level, but it's got to start from the very bottom and the very beginning of your career. Again, I've talked to my people and as I share this story, I tell them, "If you have a problem, you're not going to lose your job. I'll take you to rehab

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Myself.

Mike Pooley:

I will come to wherever you are and I will pick you up and I will take care of you because I've seen what it does to families." I've seen what ... Sorry. I saw what it did to my mom and dad and how they were absolutely heartbroken and devastated. And I remember at my sister's funeral, because of how she passed, nobody in her department was allowed to come.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

No.

Mike Pooley:

Seriously?

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Oh, good God. My

Mike Pooley:

Department showed up in force and we were all in our class A's and my parents were so humbled by that. And I remember just thinking, if I have the opportunity to help officers get through something like this, I'm going to do it. It doesn't matter what position, what rank I am, I'm going to do everything I can to help that officer because they're good people. They're good cops and they've given everything.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Absolutely everything. I'm so sorry, man. Isn't it awful that ... I'm going to wait till this finishes again. Fucking coffee machine's going to kill this man. It is, man. Man, I feel for you. I appreciate it. And I was going to say, isn't it awful that so often we learn what the right thing to do is by seeing the wrong thing being done?

Mike Pooley:

Absolutely. And I've unfortunately have seen a lot of wrong things done and I've done some wrong things, but you're right. We needed to have the courage to do what's right.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

We put policy over people.

Mike Pooley:

We do.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Wow. Well, on that cheery note,

Mike Pooley:

I'll tell you, I still, to this day, I got a lot of years left in me. I love policing. It's given me a life that I've never would have imagined growing up on the reservation. I look

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Back- In a trailer making handmade dolls.

Mike Pooley:

Yeah.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Or herding sheep.

Mike Pooley:

Never would have pictured myself being a part of a international association of chiefs of police or being in the leadership position I have had impacting communities in the way that I've been able to do. And this career has

Jerry Ratcliffe:

Done that for me. Well, I don't normally ... I try and avoid desperately to talk in terms of cliches because they're trite and often juvenile, but you really are kind of a good epitome of the American dreamer, right?

Mike Pooley:

I like to think that. Good

Jerry Ratcliffe:

On you. Thanks for spending some time with me. I appreciate it.

Mike Pooley:

It was my pleasure.

Jerry Ratcliffe:

That was episode 93 of Reducing Crime recording October 2025 in Denver, Colorado.

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Be safe and best of luck.