

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 82 – Freda Lester – The Thin Blue Line

A Visit to Jail

And now a personal word,

Freda Lester and I met in 2005. We were classmates in Leadership Charlotte Class 26, the best class ever. Here is how Leadership Charlotte describes itself: a leadership-development organization that connects a diverse group of emerging and existing leaders with the city's key decision-makers to gain a deeper understanding of how the city works. Over the course of a year, Freda and I met in a cohort of fifty classmates and immersed ourselves in challenges facing the community and what made the city successful. Every month our class explored a different topic: education, city governance, business, arts and culture, diversity and inclusion, equity and justice, and our own viewpoints and strengths as leaders. We built bonds around our shared experience of discovering ourselves and the city.

One of the topic days I remember well was law enforcement day. We learned about policing and the many ways the city secured order and safety. The police chief and criminal justice experts spoke to us. Freda, and a classmate of ours, Mike Campagna, who was also a police officer, shared with us what they loved about their work and the many challenges police officers faced. We asked them questions about carrying a gun and wearing a badge. They told us how different the job was from anything on television or in the movies.

We talked about many things that self-declared emerging leaders of the city would want to know about: underlying causes of crime, arbitrary profiling, police shootings, court sentencing, predictive analytics, automated reporting, CompStat meetings in which chiefs meet with division commanders and discuss police initiatives, the broken-windows theory, quality-of-life indicators, community outreach, the latest weapons, and crime-prevention technology. It was all heady law enforcement policy and procedure conversation. We were quite pleased with ourselves.

Then our day changed. The entire class visited the Mecklenburg County jail. All fifty of us. We received instructions on what to and not to do. We kept our hands to our sides. We dressed modestly. We avoided eye contact. We walked through the intake process where new detainees are searched and their personal items taken away. We saw inmates in jumpsuits in common areas. We walked silently in a single-file through a hallway with men imprisoned in solitary confinement. The men stood behind steel doors as we

walked by. We could see their faces through a small window staring back at us. Some men had vacant looks. Other men looked at us with anger and contempt. One man banged suddenly on his door, breaking the silence and startling us. We didn't stay long.

The visit to the jail reminded us that behind the statistics were human beings who lived far different lives than those of us who walked by in our privilege. The men behind bars were not having conversations about the challenges facing the community or what made the city successful. The men behind bars were not listening to panel discussions and asking questions to experts about predictive analytics. The men behind bars were not planning their next civic engagement activity or after-work social get-together.

Law enforcement is complex. We want our streets safe. We want law and order. But we want justice and mercy too.

It takes a remarkable person to walk the line, to carry a gun and wear a badge, to watch out for us, to run toward danger, to risk their lives for us. Over the years I've seen Freda in the community in her uniform. She is warm. She is kind. She walks the line.

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