

Community policing a key focus of new Richmond chief

By BRANDON SHULLEETA Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Thursday, February 26, 2015
9:30 pm

Alfred Durham had moved recently from Washington to Richmond for his first stint with Richmond police in the spring of 2005 when a family tragedy changed his life and fueled his passion for policing.

His younger brother, Kennzell Durham, a tire shop employee in Washington, was shot and killed by an angry customer who had demanded a refund for a tire rim.

Durham, who will be sworn in today as Richmond's new police chief, had worked many homicide cases during his years as an officer in Washington and already had seen families "stand behind that yellow tape and just pour their hearts out, looking at their loved ones lying in the street in a pool of blood."

And although he said he always had empathized with those families, his brother's death made him realize he hadn't truly understood their pain.

Durham said there still are times when he cries as he thinks about his brother.

"To see my brother there in a casket, it just hit me that I'm going to do everything I can so that nobody else feels this pain," Durham said Thursday. That day, he said, marked the beginning of his "crusade to try to stop folks from killing people."

Durham, a straight-talker who has his cellphone number on his business card, said he hopes to make Richmond a safer, more vibrant city by focusing on building stronger relationships between police and communities.

Durham, 51, became Richmond's chief Saturday and will be sworn in formally today at a ceremony that is open to the public at Virginia Union University.

The Marine Corps veteran with 27 years of experience in law enforcement has called the Richmond



20150222_MET_DURHAM_JM02

Incoming Richmond Police Chief Alfred Durham, interviewed in the conference room at Richmond Police HQ on West Grace Street, Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2015.

Police Department “one of the finest departments in this country.”

And he ranks the department’s community policing efforts at about an 8 on a scale of 1 to 10, which he said is an accomplishment but also means there’s room for improvement.

“I need everybody’s help,” Durham said. “I’m looking to create an army in every neighborhood, to reduce crime and deter crime.”

In a recent interview, Durham reflected on his youth in the 1970s, when he lived in a black neighborhood in Washington and played basketball with friends in an alley, using an old milk crate for a hoop.

Among those he considered friends was a police officer — a white guy with merely “OK” basketball moves — who seemed to know just about everybody in the neighborhood.

“In that time, if you did something wrong, they would bring you home ... and tell your parents what you did,” Durham said. “It was amazing compared with today. The parents appreciated that.”

That officer walked the neighborhood and back alleys and sat on porches talking with parents.

“The thing is, we trusted him. We could tell him things that we wouldn’t tell our parents,” Durham said.

“That’s what I’m trying to get back to — that community policing, where you have the relationships, where the police officer is a friend and not looked at as a foe.”

For much of his career, Durham climbed the ranks in the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, where he worked with Rodney Monroe before Monroe became Richmond’s chief in 2005.

Durham also left Washington in 2005 for Richmond, where he became Monroe’s chief of staff. Durham returned to Washington in 2007 and was promoted to assistant chief. He was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the police force.

Richmond hired Durham again in November, making him deputy chief before then-Chief Ray Tarasovic announced his retirement. Tarasovic, also a former Washington police officer, had replaced former Richmond Chief Bryan T. Norwood in 2013.

Durham said that since he was named Richmond’s chief this month, he has spent many nights lying awake, preparing for his new role, thinking about ways to improve what he already considers “an awesome police department.”

Officer Stacy Rogers, president of the Richmond Coalition of Police, said fellow officers appreciate Durham’s background of handling major crimes in tough Washington streets and working his way

through the ranks. In Washington, Durham had been known for his ability to chase down fleeing criminals.

“It’s sort of the fear that always happens from the patrolman’s standpoint looking up at the fifth floor (of police headquarters). ‘Do those guys still remember me? Do they still remember what it was like to be in my shoes?’ “ Rogers said, adding that Durham has the type of law enforcement background that “everybody can look at and say, ‘Hopefully, this guy remembers.’ “

Some of Durham’s visions for Richmond police could cost big money. He believes the department needs major technology upgrades, for example.

He wants officers to have body-worn cameras, something that many of the departments in central Virginia either already have purchased or are researching.

Last month, Richmond police officials said outfitting 400 officers with body cameras would cost \$435,000 in the first year.

“It’s a hefty price tag,” Durham said. “I think we need the cameras.”

“When you turn the camera on, everyone puts on their best face,” he said, making reference to studies that show body cameras lead to fewer police complaints from citizens.

Durham also said he doesn’t tolerate “bad cops.”

“Bad cops — I have no use for them,” he said. “I have no respect for them. You’re getting out of our ranks as soon as possible, if there is some legitimacy to a complaint that comes in.”

“And if I have to have you locked up, I will do that too,” he said.

Durham also wants better computer technology and systems that allow officers to quickly obtain surveillance images on computers in police cruisers.

He said that pay increases for officers also are a priority and noted that Mayor Dwight C. Jones already has shown a commitment to increasing pay for officers and that Tarasovic had been pushing for higher pay.

“That’s really the No. 1 problem within our police department right now is the huge pay discrepancy between us and other localities, and that’s created certainly a morale issue,” said Rogers, the coalition president. “That was the first thing we wanted to hear, and (Durham) addressed that right off the get-go.”

Durham, a former squad leader and platoon commander in the Marine Corps who refers to police officers as “troops,” said he plans to seek input from people in the community and also those within the

department.

“I do not believe in sitting behind the desk. ... I believe in management by walking around. So I will be in those communities. I will have my officers walk with me, to explain to me who they know in the community,” he said.

On Saturday, his first day as chief, he released a “100-Day People-Oriented Policing Initiative,” described as a continuation of the city’s community policing model that has been in place since 2005.

“Beginning today,” the plan states, “the (Richmond Police Department) will utilize visibility patrol tactics by dedicating and deploying two officers from each police precinct to walk foot beats in specific neighborhoods.”

The day Durham became chief, non-flashing blue LED lights were activated on the hoods of some Richmond police cruisers — visible from blocks away at night — making city residents aware of the police presence.

Public Square on March 12: Meet your police chief

In our first Public Square of 2015, we invite you to a conversation with the top law enforcement officials from Richmond and Chesterfield, Henrico and Hanover counties.

Durham said effective community policing sometimes is as simple as officers asking people: “How are you doing today? Any concerns? Any issues? ... If you see something, give me a call.”

“Even in the public housing, there is that one woman who’s always like the mother of the neighborhood, and you can go in and have conversations,” he said. “And the rest of the people, even the bad guys, will not look at her in a negative way for having the conversation with the police.”

Durham said he will visit inmates at the city jail.

“Not once has anybody gone to a jail and said: ‘Hey, I need you to stop committing crime. I need you to help me reduce crime.’ And that’s what I’m going to do,” Durham said. “And I’m going in as a man, without a uniform on, and (I’m going to) say: ‘Hey, I need your help.’ ” Although parts of Richmond continue to have problems with poverty, drugs and violence, the number of homicides has declined. The city recorded 44 homicides last year, compared with 95 in 2004.

Rogers, a 10-year veteran of the department, said Richmond officers sometimes struggled to solve murders a decade ago because it was difficult to get people in the community to talk with them.

But now, Rogers said, Richmond police often identify suspects soon after homicides because of their relationships in the neighborhoods.

Monroe, the former chief, said Durham's care for people is genuine.

"It's not fake," Monroe said. "He just quietly and unassumingly goes along and does the right things."

Durham said there have been problems with youth violence in Richmond, including gang-related activities and major brawls at schools.

"We've got to get a handle on that quickly before it grows out of control," he said.

His 100-day plan states that police precinct commanders will adopt elementary schools and will interact with schoolchildren weekly, such as by reading to classes, mentoring, and spreading messages of anti-bullying and safety.

"Nothing hurts me more ... than when you walk up to a kid and their parents or an adult says: 'Oh, you better be good, or that police (officer) is going to lock you up.' That's not how I want you to perceive me. You should be saying: 'If anything happens, go to that police officer.'"

Washington police Sgt. Delroy Burton, chairman of the D.C. Police Union, said he believes Durham will stick to his commitments based on what he saw of Durham in that city.

"I will tell anybody in Richmond this: If you communicate with him, tell him what you need, not only will he communicate back and try to solve the problem, he'll give you 100 percent," Burton said.

Burton said the D.C. Police Union has had a very contentious relationship with the police department leadership for much of the past several years.

But he said of Durham: "I would credit him with single-handedly helping repair the relationship between the D.C. Police Union and the administration, because he was the point of contact."

He said Durham sometimes disagreed with the union but still met with its members regularly and helped ensure that the union had a say in new department policies.

"He will hold people accountable. He's a stickler for the rules," Burton said. "No. 1, he's a good man."

On Tuesday evening, Durham was one of about two dozen people with the Richmond Police Department who went door to door in the Randolph neighborhood.

Durham chatted with dogsitter Marleny Gaitan, 23, and told her that there have been some larcenies in the neighborhood, before offering safety tips and asking her to call police if she ever sees anything suspicious.

"I need your help," Durham told her.

Community walks long have been regular outings for Richmond police and something Durham plans to continue.

“This actually is very personalized. It’s good to see police officers come out and actually introduce themselves personally and say: ‘I’m here to service you,’ “ Gaitan said.

Pauline Hymes, 72, a longtime resident of the Blackwell community and former president of the now-inactive Blackwell Neighborhood Civic Association, said association participation started dwindling several years ago because residents were afraid to tell police about drug and other problems.

“People are fearful. ... (Criminals) don’t mind killing snitches,” she said, adding that if police are only in neighborhoods when they’re called, it becomes easier for criminals to identify the snitches.

As to the notion that Durham will expand community policing, Willie Hilliard, president of the Brookland Park Area Business Association, said: “We’ve heard that story before.”

Hilliard said he frequently sees prostitutes outside as he prepares to open his barbershop in Brookland Park in the morning. He said he hopes there will be more overnight police patrols.

Hilliard also questioned why the city hired Durham, who spent much of his career outside Richmond.

In an interview before he took over as chief, Durham voluntarily raised the issue.

“I’m the seventh police chief from the outside, and I brought my command staff in here, and I asked the question: ‘Why? Why are there seven police chiefs (from the outside) when you’ve got talent here?’ “ Durham said.

“I can’t answer that question. But don’t be unhappy with me because I’m the new chief. I went through a process like everybody else.”

Monroe said Durham has worked under numerous police chiefs who wanted him on their leadership teams, adding: “We were tug-of-warring to see who was going to get (Durham) to work for them.”

Monroe added: “His time has come to be able to lead his own department.”