

“Breaking Rank”: Former Seattle Police Chief Talks About a New Vision for Law Enforcement

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By Jeanne McKnight

The year: 1999. The occasion: The WTO Ministerial, taking place in Seattle. The downtown Seattle scene: anarchists mixing with legitimate protesters and violence—smashed storefront windows, physical confrontations—that escalated to the point where Police Chief Norm Stamper authorized the use of tear gas to subdue the unruly crowd. As a side note, some of us can remember that, as the protests were taking place on the streets, then-United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan was addressing a room full of civic and business leaders, alongside members of Seattle #4, in an event that our club sponsored. For this reporter, who was working on behalf of our club to handle media relations for the event, it was one of those watershed moments: Here we were, assembled in a beautiful room at the Washington Athletic Club, listening to one of the world’s great leaders, while the “Battle of Seattle” raged below.

So why is this distant event important?

Let’s fast-forward nearly two decades, to the February 7, 2018 meeting of the Rotary Club of Seattle, a meeting featuring Seattle’s former Chief of Police (1994-2000). As we would learn throughout the program, thanks in large part to **President Mark Wright**’s artful questioning, Norm Stamper—whose career since “retirement” has included serving as a trainer, expert witness, keynote speaker, consultant, and [author](#) of two books and numerous articles—is a man on a mission to “make every school, every workplace, every neighborhood and home a place of safety, particularly for our children.” That’s just for starters.

As we would learn throughout the program, Stamper is also on a mission to fix America’s police through training, education, and community action. In addition to police reform, Stamper believes it’s time to end the *War on Drugs*, which he considers a war on citizens. And so, when asked at the end of the program what, if anything, he would do differently in his career knowing what he knows today, Stamper was quick to answer. Reflecting on his career-ending decision to authorize the use of tear gas (which he characterized as a “chemical weapon”) during the WTO protests, Stamper said that the directive was “one of the worst decisions of my 34-year career.”

Throughout the interview, in response to **President Mark**’s questions, Stamper painted a vivid picture of a young man who, essentially, became a cop “by accident.” As a kid growing up in San Diego, he said, “I didn’t have much use for the police.” For the young Stamper, becoming one of the boys in blue “truly was an accident.” As he tells the story, he accompanied a friend to a qualifying test to become a police officer and ended up also taking the test himself—although that was not his intent. His friend did not pass the test; he did. “I have had no regrets since then.”



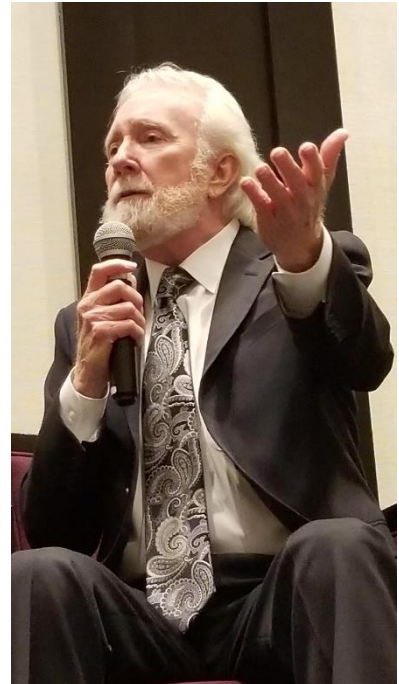
Stamper's journey took him on a road where he had to recognize he was, essentially, embracing the wrong philosophy and utilizing the wrong tactics. He was, by his own admission, "the kind of cop nobody likes" when he started his career in San Diego. "I used to bait people into taking a swing at me," he said. But then one day, someone asked the young Stamper if the U.S. Constitution meant anything to him. It was, he said, "a catalytic moment, a marker in my life."

From then on, he said, "I identified [myself] as a change agent."

Stamper also talked about the killing of unarmed black men, noting that "systemic racism is alive and well in police departments" everywhere. "Police officers are doing what they have been taught to do," he said. This culture is reinforced in locker rooms, squad cars, and squad parties.

The root of the problem, in Stamper's view, is that most police officers "are afraid of black men" and "we don't come to terms with [this] fear: It's visceral. It's real."

The solution, in Stamper's mind, is recognizing that fear is an integral part of police work. Police officers need to be trained and need experience; I need to understand that fear "affects my perception." Case in point, he said, "When you are afraid, that TV remote, that wallet," seen through a lens of fear, quickly morphs into a pistol, a deadly weapon. While fear can be a good, healthy, important mechanism, "you need to temper that fear with good policing tactics." These tactics include learning to de-escalate a situation—tactics that were definitely not in place the day in 2011 that John T. Williams, a Native American woodcarver, was shot on the streets of Seattle. Stamper described Williams's death as "predictable and preventable," given the state of training of many police officers at the time.



President Mark talked about a recent conversation with Sue Rahr, former King County Sheriff and now Executive Director of the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission—an organization whose mission is to train law enforcement professionals to protect and serve the community via better, less confrontational, training tactics.

Stamper discussed the importance of de-escalation training, which, in Seattle, has come about after the 2012 Consent Decree with the U.S. Department of Justice, with respect to the use of force and related constitutional issues: "I have no doubt there are some Seattleites alive today" because of this [de-escalation training]. Some tactics Stamper suggests:

- Slow things down.
- What we need is calm, confident police officers. What is wrong with retreating to the back of your police car in order to size things up, await backup, if possible, and—yes—slow things down?

Stamper also emphasized the need to weed out bad cops. Case in point: the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann. Cleveland PD hired Loehmann after he had lost a previous job. “If you get fired from one agency, you ought not be able to get a job at any other agency,” Stamper asserted. He also pointed out that it should have been clear before Officer Loehmann was hired that he was not police material. (Two years prior to being hired, Loehmann [struggled to complete his firearms qualification training](#). “He could not follow simple directions, could not communicate clear thoughts nor recollections, and his handgun performance was dismal,” according to a report on the shooting.)

We also learned during the audience Q&A that:

Stamper is a “strong supporter” of I-940, the initiative that seeks easier prosecution of police in deadly force cases.

He now supports the use of body cameras: “It’s a very good idea. I didn’t always agree,” he said, but, “today, I’m a believer.”

He considers the *War on Drugs* a failure that is “anti-science.” The drug war costs \$1.5 trillion to prosecute, Stamper asserted, adding that “it has been a colossal public health failure.”

“We should not put mentally ill people behind bars.” Stamper is in favor of having mental health professionals taking to the streets.

The answer to community safety is community action, not necessarily “more cops.” What’s needed is a massive campaign to get *Black Lives Matter* and *Blue Lives Matter* to come together into an “authentic partnership.”



Wednesday’s meeting started with our very own opera singer, **Howard Crabtree**, leading us in singing “America the Beautiful,” accompanied by **Freeman Fong** on the piano. **Larry Granat** then gave a moving invocation, which included a child’s prayer for the safety of his/her policeman father—an apt beginning to a program featuring Norm Stamper. **John Steckler** introduced New Member, **Angelica (Angie) Holmstrom**, former hospice nurse-turned real estate professional. Prior to the short program, everyone had the opportunity to talk to their table-mates about where in the world they would go if

given a month to travel. Following this segment, **Michael Verchot** talked about the Business Mentors program.