

A Christmas Message for the MNPD from Chief Steve Anderson

12/26/2014

<https://www.nashville.gov/News-Media/News-Article/ID/3605/A-Christmas-Message-for-the-MNPD-from-Chief-Steve-Anderson.aspx>

To All Employees:

It is the holiday season and this has been a good year. My sincere thanks for the work you do every day to make this a successful police department. The Nashville public is especially pleased with the work you do and has even more confidence in you as events have unfolded over the last few weeks.

Over the last weeks, across the nation, and here in Nashville, we have witnessed many protests and demonstrations. Some of the demonstrations have been peaceful. Some have been violent, with significant property damage. Here in Nashville, persons have gathered to express their thoughts in a non-violent manner. I thank all involved for the peaceful manner in which they have conducted themselves.

I also thank you. As a member of the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department, you have responded to these events in a manner that clearly shows that this is a professional police department staffed by professional individuals who respect the points of view of all persons. Again, thank you for showing the Nashville public that, individually and collectively, they have a police department they can be proud of.

Obviously, as you have come to know over your police career, not everyone will understand or agree with the manner in which we have responded during these demonstrations. In any endeavor we undertake, decisions should be made with a view toward producing the best outcome for all of Nashville. Our decisions must be made with this in the forefront. However, in that we work for the public, public opinion should be given consideration in the decision making process in matters such as this.

Overwhelmingly, in comments that have been directed to me, the public is supportive of your actions. Obviously, some have expressed disagreement. Most have stated their disapproval in a well thought out and rational manner. Their thoughts should be respected and given consideration.

However, as in any similar issue, there is a fringe, generally about 5 percent, on either end of the approval spectrum that have very strong views. It is readily apparent that their thought processes are driven, not by what has occurred during the demonstration, but more by the social positions taken by the demonstrators. Clearly, they are more angry at the thoughts expressed by the demonstrators than how the demonstrations are being conducted. While I respect their right to take that position, we cannot allow those views to be a part of our decision making process. Decisions need to be made with a view toward what is best for all of Nashville. Below is my reply to one such email I received. I have removed the name and other identifying information from the email in order to respect the privacy of the individual.

Again, the Nashville public is very proud of you and the work you have done over the last years. The confidence and support of the public is continually and loudly expressed to both me and the Mayor at any time we are out in

the public. Thank you for making this a very impressive police department--another thing we can celebrate during this holiday season.

I wish you and your family well during the holidays and I am predicting, thanks to the work that you do day in and day out, that we will have another very successful year.

[Email Received]

Chief Anderson,

I wanted to send you this email to express my frustration and outrage at how the situation of these protesters is being handled in Nashville. The first night protesters marched here after the incidents in Ferguson they never should have been allowed to shut down the interstate. Instead of at least threatening to arrest them, they were served coffee and hot chocolate. I don't feel that is an appropriate use of taxpayer dollars. It sends a message that they can do whatever they want and will be rewarded. Then, this past week, more protesters march around downtown for 3 or more hours and once again, no arrests, and it took THP to keep them from getting on the interstate again. Saturday night, marching and "die ins" at Opry Mills mall. How long are we going to allow these people to disrupt our city?

I have a son who I have raised to respect police officers and other authority figures, but if he comes to me today and asks "Why are the police allowing this?" I wouldn't have a good answer. If any other group of people wanted to march around the streets they would have to get a permit weeks or months in advance, and I know it's not possible to get a permit to obstruct traffic and walk on the interstate.

Please understand I am not trying to disrespect you or your department, I just want myself and my family to feel that our city is safe, and right now we don't feel that way. Is this going to be allowed to continue until someone gets hurt? Protection of the city should be coming from MNPd, not THP. I also understand that you get direction from the mayor's office, but these actions are putting the department at disharmony from the majority of the citizens. At some point you are going to have to answer this question to yourself - "Am I following or giving orders that help or hurt the community?" In closing, if these recent actions have been due to pressure from the mayor's office, please reach out to the people of Nashville, there are many who will gladly contact the mayor's office as well.

Sincerely, _____

[Reply to Email]

Mr. _____

While I certainly appreciate your offer to intercede on my behalf with our Mayor, you should know that the Mayor has not issued any order, directive or instruction on the matter with which you take issue. All decisions concerning the police department's reaction to the recent demonstrations have been made within the police department and approved by me. Therefore, any reasons or rationale supporting your proposal as what would be the best approach for all of Nashville, and not just a method of utilizing the police department to enforce a personal agenda, should be directed to me.

In that your thoughts deserve consideration, I will attempt to address some of the issues you have raised:

- Has consideration been given as to whether the response of the police department “help or hurt the community.”

It is our view that every decision made within the police department should be made with the community in mind. Obviously, there are some matters in which we have no discretion. On matters in which we do have discretion, careful consideration is given as to the best course of action, always with the welfare of the general public in mind.

That has been the consideration on this issue. Certainly, in comparing the outcome here in Nashville with what has occurred in some other cities, the results speak for themselves. I stand on the decisions that have been made.

- “These actions are putting the department at disharmony from the majority of the citizens.”

While I don’t doubt that you sincerely believe that your thoughts represent the majority of citizens, I would ask you to consider the following before you chisel those thoughts in stone.

As imperfect humans, we have a tendency to limit our association with other persons to those persons who are most like us. Unfortunately, there is even more of a human tendency to stay within our comfort zone by further narrowing those associations to those persons who share our thoughts and opinions. By doing this we can avoid giving consideration to thoughts and ideas different than our own. This would make us uncomfortable. By considering only the thoughts and ideas we are in agreement with, we stay in our comfort zone. Our own biases get reinforced and reflected back at us leaving no room for any opinion but our own. By doing this, we often convince ourselves that the majority of the world shares opinion and that anyone with another opinion is, obviously, wrong.

It is only when we go outside that comfort zone, and subject ourselves to the discomfort of considering thoughts we don’t agree with, that we can make an informed judgment on any matter. We can still disagree and maintain our opinions, but we can now do so knowing that the issue has been given consideration from all four sides. Or, if we truly give fair consideration to all points of view, we may need to swallow our pride and amend our original thoughts.

And, it is only by giving consideration to the thoughts of all persons, even those that disagree with us, that we can have an understanding as to what constitutes a majority.

- “I just want myself and my family to feel that our city is safe, and right now we don’t feel that way.”

I have to admit, I am somewhat puzzled by this announcement. None of the demonstrators in this city have in any way exhibited any propensity for violence or indicated, even verbally, that they would harm anyone. I can understand how you may feel that your ideologies have been questioned but I am not aware of any occurrence that would give reason for someone to feel physically threatened.

- “I have a son who I have raised to respect police officers and other authority figures, but if he comes to me today and asks “Why are the police allowing this?” I wouldn’t have a good answer.”

It is somewhat perplexing when children are injected into the conversation as an attempt to bolster a position or as an attempt to thwart the position of another. While this is not the type of conversation I ordinarily engage in, here are some thoughts you may find useful as you talk with your son.

First, it is laudable that you are teaching your son respect for the police and other authority figures. However, a better lesson might be that it is the government the police serve that should be respected. The police are merely a representative of a government formed by the people for the people—for all people. Being respectful of the government would mean being respectful of all persons, no matter what their views.

Later, it might be good to point out that the government needs to be, and is, somewhat flexible, especially in situations where there are minor violations of law. A government that had zero tolerance for even minor infractions would prove unworkable in short order.

Although this is unlikely, given your zero tolerance stance, suppose that, by accident or perhaps inattention, you found yourself going 40 miles per hour in a 30 miles per hour zone and that you were stopped by a police officer. Then, after making assurances that licenses were in order and that there were no outstanding warrants, the officer asked you not to speed again and did not issue a citation, but merely sent you on your way.

As you have suggested, a question may come to you from the back seat, “How can I respect the police if they will not enforce the law?” In the event this does occur, here are some facts that might help you answer that question.

In the year 2013, our officers made over four hundred thousand vehicle stops, mostly for traffic violations. A citation was issued in only about one in six of those stops. Five of the six received warnings. This is the police exercising discretion for minor violations of the law. Few, if any, persons would argue that the police should have no discretion.

This is an explanation you might give your son. Take into account, however, that the innocence of children can produce the most profound and probing questions. They often see the world in a very clear and precise manner, their eyes unclouded by the biases life gives us. This could produce the next question. “If you believe that the police should enforce the law at all times, why didn’t you insist that the officer write you a ticket?”

I don’t have a suggestion as to how that should be answered.

I do know, however, that this is a very diverse city. Nashville, and all of America, will be even more diverse when your son becomes an adult. Certainly, tolerance, respect and consideration for the views of all persons would be valuable attributes for him to take into adulthood.

Mr. _____, thank you for taking the time to express your position on this matter. I assure that your thoughts will be given all due consideration. We will continue, however, to make decisions, on this and all matters, that take into account what is best for all of Nashville.

Steve Anderson
Chief of Police