

A black and white close-up portrait of R.T. Rybak, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, smiling warmly at the camera. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is plain white.

R.T. RYBAK

MY LIFE
AS MAYOR OF
MINNEAPOLIS

**POTHOLE
CONFIDENTIAL**

A Safe Place to Call Home

I NEVER WOULD HAVE PREDICTED that some of the most vivid, complex, and emotional issues I faced as mayor involved police and public safety. Nor would I have predicted that I would spend more time working on crime than any other issue—except possibly finances. It's also clear that, like many mayors around the country, I came into office unprepared to oversee an eight-hundred-member force through crime waves in a city with deep-seated community relations challenges.

I might have been unprepared, but I was not unfamiliar.

I almost never saw police in the neighborhood where I grew up, but crime was very much a part of my family's life. Having an inner-city drug-store in the 1960s and 1970s, with narcotics in high demand, meant that my parents were held up or robbed many times.

One of the only vivid memories I have of my father is from a night when I was about seven and he got a call from the police that someone had broken into the store. As he headed out the door to meet the police, I said I wanted to come. I remember my parents arguing about whether I should go, but eventually I did. In retrospect it was a real gift because seeing my father get the details from the police, seeing his frustration and anger at someone trying to steal something from him, gave me one of the only glimpses I ever had of my dad's vulnerability. It also gave me a sense of what a robbery means to someone who works so hard for something only to see someone take it away.

Crime became far more vivid when I got a little older and learned about my mom getting held up at gunpoint, two nights in a row. Putting two and two together I realized at least one of those robberies came very close to making my brother, sister, and me orphans.

After she sold the store she was out of danger, but she started dating, and later married, Chuck Mesken, who owned several apartment buildings in the neighborhood around where the store had been. Over the years the reports we heard from Chuck about Chicago and Franklin were overwhelmingly depressing, especially the drug scene that was making the area increasingly unsafe.

Chuck, whom I came to love deeply and respect even more, died a few years before I ran for mayor. By that time he had become dispirited about the neighborhood where he had spent so much time, believing it was now almost certainly too unsafe ever to return to what it had been. Thankfully, Chuck's pessimistic view of what was happening ended up being wrong, and after years of investment and hard work, by the public, businesses, and hundreds of residents, Chicago and Franklin turned around. He would be astonished and incredibly pleased to go there today, when the area is significantly safer and there are new investments all along the street.

The south side of Minneapolis turned around, but by the time I was running for mayor deep problems persisted in north Minneapolis. One of our best campaign volunteers, Deborah Cridge, lived in the north Minneapolis neighborhood of Jordan, and one day, while marching in a parade, she asked if I would visit her neighbors to talk about crime.

I joined Deborah and her neighbors on their front porch in the Jordan neighborhood, which at that time had the highest crime numbers in the city. On many levels it was just like any other conversation with neighbors on a hot summer night, until it came to talking about crime. They matter-of-factly told chilling stories about what happened at problem properties on their block, about their children witnessing crime, about how often they heard gunshots and, when they did, how accustomed they were to hitting the floor so they wouldn't be struck by a stray bullet.

Replaying the conversation to myself on the drive home I thought about those residents' experiences working with police and about what they did together as neighbors to make the neighborhood safer. Their stories were powerful, but I had to admit to myself I probably would have left by then. I began to understand that so often in high-crime neighborhoods there is a core so toughened, maybe so numb, and definitely so dedicated that they won't be scared away. Over time I found that core group in almost every high-crime neighborhood I worked in and came to understand two very basic things: almost nothing makes a place safer than committed

neighbors working together, and almost nothing works without getting them on your side.

During the campaign I also got a real earful from voters about what so many saw as a broken relationship between the police and the city's communities of color, especially African Americans. The LGBT community, which had so many issues with the police when I was a crime reporter, now had officers at every rank, and this had dramatically reshaped relations with the community. It was sadly notable that during the time when so much progress had been made with police relations with one community, so little had been made with African Americans.

This had been a key motivator behind my awkward attempt to replace Chief Olson. After that failed, the chief and I settled into a very uneasy truce, much to his credit. We set aside any differences we had on a hot night that August 2002 when we received a call that one of our officers had been shot. I rushed to the hospital and met the chief, who told me Officer Melissa Schmidt, a highly respected member of the force, had been killed. She had been in a public housing building, escorting a woman with serious mental health issues to the restroom, when the woman pulled a gun out of her shoe and killed Schmidt.

I WALKED THE COUPLE OF BLOCKS back to City Hall to join the chief in announcing Schmidt's death to the media. Only a few lights were on and as we walked down the grand staircase we could only see deep shadows across the rotunda. As we got closer it became clear that in those shadows was a wall of blue.

In the middle of the night a few hundred police officers had come from around the city. They said almost nothing. The officers in that sea of faces had none of the swagger you see on so many cops as they go about their normal days. All I could see was vulnerability. Tough people with a tough job suddenly looked—in a very transparent way—scared. On a normal day cops seem like skydivers, who can only do their job if they don't think about what could go wrong. Tonight, grieving the loss of an almost universally respected friend and coworker, it was clear they saw in very real terms just how things can go very, very wrong.

For years after that night, when I walked down that staircase after a late night at work, I would see shadows across the rotunda and remember the night Melissa Schmidt died. I never forgot the looks on those faces. They

reminded me of the moment I really understood the gravity of being the one person ultimately responsible for sending hundreds of people every day into dangerous situations from which they may not come back.

A few days later, when I spoke at Schmidt's funeral in the small Wisconsin town of Bloomer, I tried to capture that moment by talking about an "invisible circle of blue" that surrounds most of us. We go about our day, walking to school, taking the bus to work, going from the parking ramp to our office, completely unaware that we are protected by that invisible circle of blue. As we move freely about our daily lives, the fact that we don't have to think about the police who protect us is a testament to the fact that they are doing their job. Most of us don't realize the privilege we have of knowing our families are safe because other people's loved ones are in constant danger.

Human nature is to run from harm. Who are those people who willingly run *to* the danger? How do they feel when that danger is exposed in the deadliest of ways? What do their families think the next night when they send someone they love off to work for what could be either another routine night or that one time when fate catches up with them?

Officers I've talked to say they rarely talk about the risks of the job with other cops, but they are keenly aware of what can happen. When one of them dies, police from across the nation show up. As I walked down the steps of the church in Bloomer where Officer Schmidt's funeral was held, I saw hundreds, maybe thousands, of officers from all around the country standing at attention along the funeral procession route. They came from everywhere.

I only knew Melissa Schmidt briefly before she died. She had a reputation of being an officer who could speak to both sides of that invisible line between police and community. She had the respect of the officers she worked with every day and the people in neighborhoods she was there to protect. The day after her shooting I door-knocked all three towers of the public housing complex where she was shot with Cora McCorvey, head of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority. We wanted the residents to know we cared and their building was safe, and to hear what was on their minds. Door after door, floor after floor, we heard one story after the next about small acts Officer Schmidt and other officers had done over the years to keep a building that could have had troubles a safe place to call home. That was the best eulogy you could ever hear.

Not every officer has that gift, to be respected both in the community

and on the force. In fact, so often I would learn that being one makes it harder to be the other. It isn't surprising. Almost every image we have of bravery involves protecting against a common enemy—the other football team, the opponent in war, even the competitor in business. For the police and the community, the common enemy is the bad guys who are victimizing people. But sometimes, after years of fighting uphill battles against seemingly unstoppable crime, some cops begin to see the whole community as the bad guy. That's when a random cop on a bad night in a bad neighborhood where he's fought the same criminals for years will make a stupid comment to a victim like "This wouldn't happen if you didn't live here." It's also when you see a random cop do far worse, and the proliferation of videos in recent years has brought to life proof that that are times when some police treat some communities, especially African Americans, with a lack of respect and with force shockingly beyond how anyone would treat people they are supposed to protect and serve.

The circle of protection for a police fraternity then becomes smaller, especially when police begin to believe that the political leaders who control their work don't understand what it's like on the street from day to day. As some of them begin to think they won't get the backing they deserve when they have to make a tough arrest, the circle gets even smaller. "Us" becomes fellow officers, while "them" becomes everyone else, very often including the chief and administration and, almost always, the mayor. That's when trouble really starts.

Trouble can get even worse when the community begins to feel the same way—when the police are seen as an "occupying force" with no regard for the people they are supposed to protect. That isn't surprising either, especially when you consider that generations have passed down stories about unjust treatment where no one was held accountable, incidents that were often not believed until, again, the proliferation of videos shocked much larger audiences with examples of what so many African Americans already knew too well for way too long. It is impossible to see the videos we have seen and pretend public safety is color blind, and as heartbreaking as it was to see in my own city, it was clear to me that many police officers on our force did not have the life experiences, the training, or the cultural understanding to build deep relationships with African Americans. Not most officers, not half of the officers, but, sadly, many have also given up trying.

It's also sad, but true, that generations of bad relations with police make

it intensely difficult for many African Americans to arrive at an interaction with a police officer and be able to see that person as someone who will protect and serve. That may not always be fair for an officer to have to deal with generations of pent-up anger and suspicion, but the fact remains that a cop in today's world has to understand that there are legitimate reasons why every interaction with every African American doesn't start on neutral ground.

There were so many times in those early years at scenes of crimes when I could see in the starkest of terms that the gulf between the police and the community was dramatically more complex when you crossed racial lines. It hit home for me personally in one of the least likely settings: the stands at a high school football game. As our sons were on the field, my friend Suzie Robinson and I were talking in the stands. Her son, Brandon, was the star of the team, one of the most talented football players ever to come out of Minnesota and, most significantly, a remarkable young man. I was telling Suzie that our son, Charlie, got his driver's license earlier that year, and she began telling me what it was like to wait up for Brandon to get home at night, especially when he drove through one particular suburb where he almost always got stopped by the police. Suzie, who, I am very sad to say, has since died, was white. Her husband, George, is black. The experience her mixed-race son had simply driving a car was so radically different from my son's. Unlike her, I never had "the talk" with my son about driving—I never worried the police would stop him. Two white parents, same school, same football team, same part of town, but because one of Brandon's parents was black, our two boys faced dramatically different challenges.

Years later I would get an even deeper understanding of the privilege my family and I had as white people when I read Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*. The book is a letter to his son, telling him what an African American boy should learn from his African American dad. As he tried to explain to his son the life he would lead as a black man, I couldn't help but think about the hundreds of warnings and brutal explanations I never had to give our own kids, and realized how far we have to go.

These issues become more complex when they are compounded by disparities in income, and in places with already high crime rates, as they are in north Minneapolis. I saw that one afternoon when I got word that rumors were swirling in north Minneapolis that a police officer had sodomized a man with a plunger. The police denied it happened, and the

account seemed suspect because it was strangely similar to an incident alleged to have happened recently in New York. But what if one of our officers actually had done that? My job was to take the rumor seriously, and within a few hours my job was also to try to find a way to calm a community that was ready to explode with rage. It was going to take a few days to sort through all the facts, but people needed a place to vent their anger immediately.

My first impulse was always to go to the scene, but our team discussed what would happen if we met with the alleged victim, or attended a street corner protest, and all kinds of red flags went up. We needed a more controlled scene, a place where we could try to lower the temperature and get to the facts. So we agreed to do a community meeting.

That night I walked into the steamy gym at Farview Park in north Minneapolis, where a few hundred people, for a couple of hours, lambasted the police department and, specifically, me. One speaker after another demanded the resignation of the officer alleged to have done this. I knew I couldn't act because we had no proof the officer assaulted the man. But I also saw it as my role to let the heat out, to hear the anger as we moved toward the truth. So there I sat in the middle of the room for two hours with people demanding answers I couldn't give. One minister dramatically marched into the room surrounded by an angry entourage and announced he had proof the incident had happened. This got the crowd even madder. He dramatically marched out without giving me a chance to talk.

The meeting ended, the angry crowd just a little bit calmer when they left. As badly beaten up as you get at a neighborhood meeting, I got into the car with Mike Kirchen, the police officer who led my security, and we drove away in silence. We didn't talk for a few minutes. He didn't know what to say, and I didn't have much left. Finally I broke the silence. Defensively, and clearly trying to convince myself, I said, "Even tonight, I still love being mayor of Minneapolis." I'm not sure he believed it. I like to think I did.

Months after that horrible night, it became clear that the officer did not commit the crime. These are the moments when you see the disconnect between the rightful call for immediate justice and the deeply necessary job an official like a mayor has to protect the rights of every person, cop or resident. Facts don't fall neatly into place by the next deadline. Due process doesn't turn on a news cycle. When the community hears about something

like sodomizing a member of the community, there is understandable outrage and, rightfully, people demand immediate action. But what if we had acted against an innocent man?

WHAT I DIDN'T HAVE THE INSIGHT TO PUT TOGETHER in those early years was that after 9/11 the threat of terrorism was remaking police departments around the country and, unfortunately, in my own city on my own watch. Along with protecting their fellow residents of the community, police were now also expected to be on the lookout for abstract threats from "elsewhere." Community policing, based on building relationships with the people they were supposed to "protect and serve," was no longer the only goal, and departments were suddenly flooded with sophisticated weapons and equipment that looked very much like what you would see on a battlefield. "Clinton Cops" grants and other federal resources that helped pay for more officers on the beat went away, a loss made much worse by the state's deep cuts to cities. Meanwhile federal funds for anti-terrorism equipment and critical incident training were seemingly unlimited.

At the time, it seemed we were taking the necessary steps to deal with this complex and frightening new task. Now it is clear to me that the threat of terrorism militarized policing around the country and in my own city. We devalued the importance of individual officers and individual neighbors looking each other in the eye and building the relationships that protect a neighborhood. The focus turned to impersonal weapons of war in the hands of soldier-cops wearing helmets with darkened glass that made it impossible to see the eyes of the human being inside. A cop is not a soldier, far from it, but the threat of terrorism and the flood of weapons and technology coming from the frontlines of Iraq into the country's neighborhoods blurred these lines more and more.

The impact, and my own inadequacy in seeing this earlier, really hit home very late in my final term as I was sitting onstage during my last police swearing-in. I watched an impressive class of new recruits march down the aisle in lockstep as a drill instructor barked out orders. Impressive as they were, honed through tough training into a well-oiled fighting machine, it became completely clear that we were training them for the wrong war.

Yes, without a doubt, cops need to be tough, but imagine if we had marched those recruits down the center aisle, not in unison in a drill line

but, instead, each paired with a member of the community with whom they had built a meaningful relationship. Skip a day or two of the drill training and, instead, send the recruits on foot into a tough neighborhood with an experienced community-oriented police officer and have them simply learn how to gain people's trust. Help them recognize that the neighborhoods they are supposed to protect have, it's true, lots of tough criminals, but the vast majority of people are going to be their best allies. In fact, if they don't understand how to find and nurture these alliances, no amount of weaponry and drilling will keep the peace.

In the year and a half after I left office one incident after the other—Ferguson, Baltimore, and, eventually Minneapolis—exposed the divides we have between police and community. Among the few serious regrets I have about my time as mayor, one of the deepest is that I didn't realize earlier that we were simply training cops for the wrong job.

When I left office and had the space to stand back and think about policing, especially during two years dominated by explosive police issues in Minneapolis and around the country, I spent many hours trying to understand what more could be done. It became even clearer to me that you cannot isolate the issues of police and safety without putting them in the context of a society that has growing issues with economic equity and racism. We can't expect to hire cops to insulate us from the deeper problems we aren't willing to solve ourselves. That was one reason we would eventually stop talking so much about "public safety," which sends a message that protection is the only goal, and spend more time talking about "building a safe place to call home," which says more about mixing enforcement with deeper systemic changes in housing, employment, and community building.

Demilitarizing and diversifying police forces can help bridge these divisions. Even more important would be to have a much more public conversation about the type, and level, of force we are willing to tolerate to be safe. Those choices are made every day by the police professionals, but what if that discussion became far more public so that citizens were informed about the options police have in a crisis and police gained a much deeper understanding of how far people are willing to go.

We had such a conversation in a less public way later in my time in office when we saw several tapes of officers using a series of kicks to subdue someone resisting arrest. We asked Chief Tim Dolan whether this was

necessary; he reviewed the policy and decided it was not. He clarified the training and procedure, and we arrived at a balance of safety and values by making it clear that officers should not kick to subdue.

So often when someone is shot members of the public will rightfully ask why an officer did not simply shoot at the person's leg to injure him or her, like you see in so many cop shows. Police I have asked about this will often say this tactic works on television but that in real life a shot at the leg of a person who is running away has a very low percentage of success and, when dealing with someone who may be heavily armed, missing that shot could mean the lives of everyone in the area are at risk. If members of the public are in clear danger, do they support a police officer using deadly force?

These are horrendous choices, but they are, in fact, the choices that have to be made in a split second by an officer. Right now those decisions are being made primarily within police departments. Opening that topic to uncomfortable public discussions would at least mean that when a horrible incident occurs, the conversation can be about whether the officer followed the agreed procedure, instead of the much more explosive issue of values in the middle of a crisis.

WHEN YOU HEAR ABOUT A CRIME on the news it appears far more clear cut, but I was seeing over and over as mayor that the reality is rarely that straightforward. I saw a reality that had far fewer good guys/bad guys—white hats/black hats. The “truth” doesn't always come as easily as it should.

The most complex example of that reality that I encountered involved an officer named Duy Ngo. I first heard his name during a middle-of-the-night call from Chief Olson telling me that one of our officers, who had been working undercover, had been shot by other officers. I got to the hospital quickly and met his parents, a quiet couple who had immigrated from southeast Asia. It was so moving hearing about a family coming halfway around the world and being so proud that their son was a police officer. His parents, brother, and wife were rightfully horrified that he was in grave condition. Later, my wife joined us to sit with them until morning as they waited for him to get out of surgery.

I braced myself for the worst, for another officer killed like Melissa Schmidt. But there also were reports that the situation was more complex,

and the details were very confusing about why the officer had gone undercover without authorization the night before taking military leave.

Ngo survived, but for months the rightful sympathy people had for an officer hurt in the line of duty was met with suspicion that something more had happened. It was hard to get the truth but years later, based on the facts and the complexity of the case, the city council and I awarded a badly injured Ngo \$4.5 million.

DURING THOSE DIFFICULT TIMES when we confronted so many issues of public safety, I had the extreme good fortune to work with V. J. Smith, a former drug dealer who turned his life around and now leads the Minneapolis chapter of the nonprofit organization MAD DADS (Men Against Destruction, Defending Against Drugs and Social Disorder). This group of men—who once led lives filled with crime and drugs—show up within minutes of any critical incident in the city with their trademark green van and green T-shirts. V. J. gets on his mobile mike, tries to calm the crowd, and tries to bring the attention back to the victims and their families' suffering. I saw V. J. at so many horrible incidents, murder scene after murder scene, surrounded almost always by people in deep grief and usually rightful anger, and never once saw him lose his cool. I would watch him fearlessly wade into one explosive situation after another, usually diffuse it, and always react with nothing but compassion.

Two other people I came to deeply respect from their work at those tough moments at crime scenes were Don and Sondra Samuels, two remarkable community activists from the Jordan neighborhood. They dedicated themselves to keeping more middle-class homeowners from leaving the high-crime neighborhood where they lived.

The Samuelses were outraged about how differently people saw crime in different parts of the city—an incident in a low-crime neighborhood was covered in the media for weeks, but the same sort of incident in their neighborhood could go virtually unnoticed. Every life lost, they said, needed to stand for something, so they began holding their own vigils for victims. No matter who died, or how the person died, the Samuelses would go to the scene and pay their respects. Eventually they developed a following of people from all around the metropolitan area, especially from churches in more affluent areas, who came into the highest-crime areas after the worst acts of violence to stand on a corner and mark the loss of

a life. Don continued this work when he was elected to the Minneapolis City Council and, later, to the Minneapolis School Board. Sondra attacks the root causes of crime in her leadership of the Northside Achievement Zone, Minneapolis's version of the Harlem Children's Zone, which builds cradle-to-career supports for children in the same neighborhoods where we so often stood at vigils for those murder victims.

DURING MY YEARS IN OFFICE, with so many things on my plate, it became clear that the mayor who wanted to spend time working on everything but crime—like the reporter years ago at the *Star Tribune* who wanted to write about everything but crime—was finding himself consumed by police issues.

I had a lot to learn and the more I learned the more I realized I didn't know. I made many mistakes, but I kept showing up. I knew my job wasn't to be the police chief. I didn't have to direct the force. But the force, and far more important, the victims' families and people in high-crime areas, needed to see I cared.

So when something happened I went to the scene. Over and over and over again.

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