

REINVENTING AMERICA

Going from teen mom to D.C. police chief, Cathy Lanier is creating.....

New Ways To Stop Crime

by David Baldacci

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AS CHIEF OF POLICE IN Washington, D.C., Cathy L. Lanier never has the luxury of easing into the day. Her mornings begin with a jolt at 5 a.m., when the BlackBerry messages start arriving from Joe Persichini, assistant director of the FBI's D.C. field office. These urgent missives cover terrorism, joint-task-force missions, and current national-security intelligence. Lanier's schedule is punishing, to say the least. And thanks to her discipline and commitment, the 42-year-old has attracted national attention as one of the most successful big-city police chiefs in America.

For much of the last decade, D.C. had one of the highest murder rates among America's large cities. However, as of mid-July, its homicide rate is 14% lower than at this time last year, putting the city on track to have one of its lowest murder rates in years. During Lanier's two and a half years on the job as top cop, other categories of major crime have fallen as well, and the force's closure rate on homicides in 2008 was the highest on department record.

Lanier is D.C.'s first female police chief—a white woman in a police department that is mostly male in a city that is mostly black. She says simply, "To be able to lead other officers takes credibility and trust." Those are qualities that she has built up in 19 years on the force.

Her early life did not portend such achievement. She grew up with two brothers in a Maryland suburb. She got pregnant at 14, dropping out of school after ninth grade to have a son and marry the father. By 18, she was divorced. Instead of continuing on a downward spiral, Lanier got a GED and enrolled in college. She joined the police force, partly because of its tuition-reimbursement program, and became an officer at 23. While working full time, she earned undergraduate and master's degrees from Johns Hopkins University. She holds another master's from the Naval Postgraduate School and is also a graduate of the FBI Academy.

Lanier's first on-the-job experience of violence came when, on patrol with a partner, she confronted five large men with pockets full of drugs. She was punched in the face and had to hold her own in a fight until backup arrived. "I got my butt kicked," she says without a trace of bruised ego. In another episode, a domestic-violence call had her charging to the aid of a woman who had been severely injured by her deranged companion. Lanier was within seconds of shooting the man before officers came to assist her. In 19 years on the force, she has fired her gun only once—at two attacking pit bulls.

Then, as a young officer, Lanier made a potentially bridge-burning move. After being sexually harassed by a superior who went unpunished, she (and another female colleague) sued the very police department that she now heads.

UNDER LANIER, COPS ARE PART OF THE COMMUNITY – NOT THE OPPOSITION.

"In the early 1990s, there was a different culture in the department than there is today," Lanier explains. "Back then, the culture dictated that it was okay to make explicit sexual comments and have inappropriate contact with female officers. I brought a lawsuit with the goal of changing that culture and hopefully helping others going through the same thing." Although the superior denied wrongdoing, Lanier and her fellow officer received \$75,000 each in a settlement of the case. Today, the D.C. police force is approximately 25% female.

Broad-shouldered and 6 feet tall, Lanier cuts an imposing figure. She is known for speaking bluntly. At a recent press conference held after a bloody Fourth of July weekend in which six people were shot to death in D.C., she warned the killers: "We're out looking, and if we don't have you yet, we will have you very soon."

Lanier's crime-fighting philosophy is based on the principle that today's police forces must be proactive rather than reactive. "We can no longer wait for crime to come to us but need to look at the history and the trends and project from there."

Lanier uses real-time statistics to figure out how and where to allocate officers. "In D.C.," she explains, "3% of the addresses account for 50% of the violent crime. We use sophisticated formulas gleaned from arrest records to identify potential offenders." She and her officers track these MVPs (most violent persons) and make sure they know the cops are watching.

PEOPLE HAVE DISAGREED WITH SOME of Lanier's tactics. She has used curfews and surveillance cameras in high-crime areas and initiated new search-and-seize methods to get guns off the street. After a burst of fatal shootings in the Trinidad section in May 2008, Lanier instituted five days of checkpoints so that any driver wishing to enter the area was stopped by officers.

Arthur Spitzer, legal director for the ACLU's Washington office, denounced it as "Baghdad, D.C." Mary Cheh, a City Council member and law professor at George Washington University, called it "outrageous."

"WE CAN'T WAIT FOR CRIME TO COME TO US," LANIER SAYS

Lanier counters, "While scholars of constitutional law pick our activities and methods apart, I have personally heard from citizens who are grateful for our presence and actually ask us to use checkpoints and curfews in their neighborhoods. I once heard an analogy comparing the checkpoints to airport security: Although it was a little inconvenient, it saved lives."

Another initiative that has drawn some controversy is called All Hands on Deck. Over a weekend, every available police officer—from rookie to detective—is on duty and on patrol, saturating the city. Lanier intends this periodic program to serve as part anti-crime sweep, part get-to-know-your-local-police event. "It's important that officers interact with citizens," Lanier says. "That way they're seen as part of the community and not the opposition." While it's hard to assess if community relations have improved, in two weekends this spring, the police made 887 arrests and seized thousands of dollars in drugs.

Being accessible to D.C. residents is one of Lanier's top priorities. She gives her business card to everyone she meets and her private cellphone number to anyone who asks. Last July, she was lying in bed on a brutally hot night when she received a call from a mother of seven who lived in one of the city's poorest areas. They were roasting to death, the woman told Lanier, because the building had no air conditioning. Lanier bought the woman an AC unit and delivered it herself. Yet, she says, "I still felt guilty that eight people were huddled in one room to escape 100-degree heat."

Of course, she must always be available for the district's most important resident, President Barack Obama. Her police department assists the U.S. Secret Service in providing his protection. For the inauguration in January, Lanier meticulously mapped out the miles-long parade route and the entire National Mall in square-foot increments to make sure that there was adequate security coverage. Whenever the President goes for a ride, she must supply major manpower. "When he wants to go from the White House to the National Cathedral, which is less than three miles, it takes 150 officers on duty, plus a standing force at the destination," she says. "I have to pull those bodies from somewhere. It makes crime planning a real challenge."

Despite her elevated title, Lanier is still very much a beat cop at heart. She regularly attends morning roll calls, rotating among D.C.'s seven police districts so that officers can see and talk to her. She monitors radio calls from her car—Cruiser One—so she can hear how her people are responding. A cop recently wounded on duty found Chief Lanier sitting next to him in the ambulance on the ride to the hospital. She has also created a website that officers can use to contact her directly. She says, "It's so they can reach me with no buffer."

Officer Raymond Hawkins patrols D.C.'s Fifth District. Of Lanier, he says, "She's pushed a scout car just like I do. She knows what it's like to walk the pavement. She hears crime stats all day long, but what she really wants to know is, How's it going on your beat? She's very approachable. But if you go to her with a problem, you'd better have a solution, too. She'll give you resources if you have an answer she thinks will work, but having no solution is unacceptable to her."

CHIEF LANIER CREDITS HER SUCCESS to the love and support of her mother, herself a single parent. "My mother could have given up on me when I didn't make the decisions that everyone else thought I should, but she didn't, and that's when I learned that compassion, understanding, and patience would be the most important characteristics that I employed in my chosen profession. My greatest strength as a police officer is my ability to relate to anyone, no matter their background."

Lanier feels that her unconventional history helps her identify with the city residents whom she's trying to keep safe. "Being a single mom at age 15 and also a high school dropout, it teaches you things about life that no other experience can. I could have easily gone down the wrong path. I know that a single positive mentor in someone's life can make all the difference."

She adds, "The best thing we can do sometimes as police officers is get out of our cruisers and throw the ball with kids, let them wear our hats, or just give them a hug. It's often as simple as that."

David Baldacci is the best-selling author of 17 novels. His upcoming thriller "True Blue," to be published in October, features a fictional female police chief.

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