



Pioneering policemen

Black officers owe a debt to a dozen cops who fought humiliating rules in the 1960s and won.

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ST. PETERSBURG - Forty-two years ago, 12 African-American police officers did a stunning thing. They sued their employer, the city of St. Petersburg, to win the right to arrest people. "We were black men bucking the system," said Primus Killen, one of the 12. Because the officers were black, they could not put a white person in jail. They could not patrol anywhere but in black neighborhoods. Besides its demeaning symbolism, the practice handcuffed black officers' careers. It made it difficult to gain experience in duties other than the gritty, routine work of keeping peace on some of the toughest streets in town. But in St. Petersburg in 1965, it was city policy.

Both white and black people picked up the fact and flung it like a rock. You're nothing but half a cop, the insults implied.

"Hearing that from our own kind ... I'd be lying if I said it didn't affect me," said Horace Nero, a black officer who joined the force in 1962 and spent 40 years on the job.

With an idealistic young lawyer named James B. Sanderlin leading the way, the suit took three years to play out. When it was over, black officers could patrol the entire city and arrest anyone.

During a contentious era of strikes, assassinations and counterculture protests, a landmark St. Petersburg civil rights case earned scant attention then. It has languished since, nearly forgotten.

But some of today's ranking black officers remember the men they say helped pave the way for African-Americans in law enforcement careers.

"I consider these guys to a certain degree heroes. Any time you have individuals who will stand up for what they believe and go against the institutional, unfair policies, I think that's heroic," said Assistant Chief Cedric Gordon, who joined the St. Petersburg force in 1980.

From kids to cops

"We are all homegrown kids out of the rough neighborhoods of St. Petersburg, and now we had these shiny blue uniforms on," said Adam Baker.

It reminded him of something heroic. "Like having black cowboys," said Baker, whose name led the list of the 12 plaintiffs in the suit.

Many of the young officers who stood together in 1965 knew one another as kids.

They grew up during the 1950s in segregated St. Petersburg near 22nd Street S or in close-knit neighborhoods called Methodist Town, Pepper Town and the Gas Plant. Later, they would patrol their old haunts as police officers.

Leon Jackson played stickball on the streets. James King put skates on boxes and zoomed around the apron of a Gulf Oil service station on Ninth Street S. Freddie Lee Crawford and Baker started first grade together at the old Davis Academy on Third Avenue S.

Later, they went to Gibbs High School. They made the football team. Crawford was the center. Next to him on either side were guards Nero and King. Robert Keys started at tackle, sometimes end. Baker played any position that was open. Raymond De Loach was a basketball player.

Crawford, remembered as a straight-A student, was by his own admission "brazen" - even in high school.

When the school system contracted with the city to send buses for Gibbs students, the buses had signs ordering "colored" to the rear. Crawford said he tore them down.

Gibbs was segregated then, as was virtually every other aspect of life in St. Petersburg, a small, conservative city clinging tenaciously to old ways even as it grew dramatically after World War II.

"You couldn't even be caught downtown after dark unless you were walking to work," Jackson said.

It was the same elsewhere in Florida and in much of the South.

King said that when he was a child still living in the small community of Hernando in Citrus County, he saw men wearing striped clothes working on the roadside.

He ran out of the house for a closer look. His mother called for him to come back. The men were prisoners, and King recalled a guard who yelled at his mother:

"If you don't break him, we will."

There was no such thing as ancient history. The past played a role in everyday life; it played into the decision black men made to become police officers.

Although a police job could mean a chance to make a difference in the Jim Crow system, officers often remained an unpleasant symbol.

"I had reservations initially," Nero said. He said he had seen how law enforcement could be used to suppress black people's rights.

"I didn't want to be seen in that light," he said.

Still, Nero and the others understood the implications of standing up to the city. Goliath Davis, a former police chief and now a deputy mayor, said Crawford was especially farsighted.

"He had a keen sense of how pervasive law enforcement was, and is, in the life of (black) folks. He knew that people of color had to be in policymaking decisions," said Davis, who joined the Police Department in 1974.

During the precarious '60s, Crawford's argument helped persuade his friends.

One or two at a time, the hometown kids applied. They passed civil service exams. They endured investigations, sometimes conducted secretly.

King worked at the Tramor Cafeteria. One day he experienced a particularly exasperating customer.

"The guy would drop a fork and say, 'Go get me another fork, boy.' Then he'd deliberately drop the new one and tell me to go get another one," King said.

The customer turned out to be a police officer poking at a potential recruit's reaction, King said. King didn't get mad or rattled, which evidently meant he passed the "test."

Problems up the ranks

The officers wanted to avoid a court fight. They met with police brass, hoping to make changes that would let them grow professionally. Nothing happened.

"We did not experience extensive racism in the ranks from the other officers," Nero said. "There was no in-your-face attitude displayed to us. Up the supervisory chain, this was where things got a little sticky."

Off-duty bull sessions kept the issues alive. Then came a catalyst.

Charlotte McCoy owned Doctors Pharmacy at 1421 22nd St. S. It had a lunch counter and it was natural for the beat cops to stop in.

There, over sandwiches and midday banter, some of the officers met James Sanderlin, whose offices were two doors down. The lawyer already had gone to court in 1964 seeking to desegregate county schools, a suit that would take seven years to resolve.

Now he listened to what the cops had to say.

And on May 11, 1965, Sanderlin filed a federal court suit.

It charged the city with discrimination and demanded that it end.

To pay the legal costs, the officers, most of whom earned a little more than \$200 biweekly, took out a bank loan.

"It was done for ourselves to alleviate our pain," Baker said.

Sanderlin, who grew up in Petersburg, Va., and Washington, D.C., graduated from Howard University. He earned a law degree from Boston University and could have lived comfortably in the metropolitan Northeast.

But Sanderlin wanted to fight for civil rights. So the young lawyer moved to St. Petersburg when he was 31. With Frank Peterman Sr. and Frank White, he opened an office on 22nd Street S.

Then the most important thoroughfare for the city's African-American residents, a 10-block strip of it brimmed with businesses, professional offices, grocery stores, a movie theater, funeral homes, a hospital, and bars and nightclubs.

The latter boomed on weekend nights. Sometimes things got rough. Black officers might walk four abreast on the sidewalks to discourage trouble.

To the northeast lay three other black neighborhoods, the Gas Plant area, Methodist Town and the remnants of St. Petersburg's first black settlement, Pepper Town. They were part of what was referred to as Zone 13. Within it, 22nd Street was called Beat 7.

Zone 13 was the only section black officers could patrol. No white officers could do so, according to court records.

Black officers rarely got weekends off because supervisors said that was when they were most needed.

To Baker, it represented an unspoken white fear about "the black problem."

"I arrived at the conclusion I was being used," Baker said. "I thought about my situation. I was being used to handle the black problem. Our whole police policy was to have black policemen police black people."

Police brass didn't get that specific in public.

But in its defense, the city denied discrimination, saying black officers were assigned to mostly black neighborhoods because they could do a better job there than white officers.

"Italian policemen would do better in Italian neighborhoods, too," a high-ranking officer was quoted as saying.

Lawsuit likely a first

A newspaper called the suit "probably" the first of its kind in the nation under the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The first round ended badly for the officers. Federal district Judge Joseph Lieb dismissed the case in March 1966. But Sanderlin appealed and, offering to pay the cost, the NAACP stepped in.

Leroy Clark, a lawyer for the NAACP's Legal Defense and Educational Fund, helped handle the appeal.

It wasn't as though the NAACP had nothing else to do.

"It was astounding" how many cases the organization was dealing with at the time, Clark, 72, said in an interview this year.

But St. Petersburg's brought a special challenge. Part of the case was "unique" and "difficult," Clark said, because Harold Smith, the police chief, didn't treat the black officers as inferiors but simply contended that they could do the job better in black neighborhoods.

"The problem is, it was too simplistic an analysis," Clark said. "It's a stereotypical assumption and it doesn't in any precise way hold up."

Delays stalled the case. Paperwork got lost. Finally, on Aug. 1, 1968, the word came down. The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said that presumed police efficiency must yield to constitutional rights.

The court spelled out its decision in terse legal terms: "Reversed and remanded."

Said the court: "Nothing ... is intended to suggest that the Negro officers on the police force of St. Petersburg should be given preferential treatment.

"They deserve only what they seek - equality."

The black officers had won.

Attitudes improved

Harold Smith, the police chief, said policy changes the officers wanted had been made before the appeals court ruling. The African-American officers were assigned citywide.

"You could tell there was resentment," Keys said, "but attitudes improved gradually."

Seven of the 12 who sued are still alive. In their 60s and 70s, most are retired now. Five live in St. Petersburg. Sanderlin, who died in 1990, became Pinellas County's first black judge.

The officers see themselves as civil rights warriors who got lost in history.

"We like to think we stood up. We had nerve enough, we had decency enough for the moment," Baker said.

Many of those who followed give them credit.

"It had tremendous ramifications for the overall community," said Davis, an African-American who became police chief 23 years after joining the force. "It meant people of color had an opportunity to participate and it enhanced justice for everybody, not just a few."

Cedric Gordon, the assistant chief, puts it this way:

"We stood on their shoulders."