

Mike the Cop, a Knox Street Story

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Growing up in the rural burbs, I had very little interaction with the police. I don't even recall even talking to a cop, except during Christmas holiday, when the men at the United Jewish Center, our synagogue in Danbury, would volunteer to serve as traffic cops at our one traffic light town so the real police could have the day off. It was the 1950's, a much simpler time, think Mayberry, and I remember seeing my dad directing traffic at an intersection near Feinson's menswear store, and the local candy shop, Ochbergs. Rick Ochberg happened to be my best friend. Rick and I would spend Christmas afternoon watching the men from the UJC, including my father, direct traffic, while sipping our milkshakes at his family's store and occasionally grabbing a handful of M and M's.

And to be honest, other than an occasional traffic ticket, I don't recall talking to a cop in the next 40 years, until my late 50's. And then I was hired at Knox Street, a low income apartment complex in the middle of the ghetto, and I became much more acquainted with the men in blue. My training included a trip down to the local precinct, where I met several officers and learned procedures for different criminal events, and we exchanged phone numbers, and just talked about the area. Although I didn't know it at that moment, it was all part of my real education about life.

And a day rarely went by at the office when I didn't see flashing red lights and hear the blare of the police siren. The neighborhood had a few assorted gangs, a drug dealer here and there, and it wasn't unusual to come to work on Monday morning and hear about a neighborhood knifing or shooting over the weekend. There was a bar on the corner of the street which we shut down in my second year of employment, but in the first year, at least once a month the maintenance man would be washing down blood off the sidewalk.

Mike Fiorino was the officer assigned to walk the neighborhood beat, which included Knox Street. Twenty five, good looking, Irish mother and Italian father, both FBI agents, he fit the mold....When he was on days, and walked Knox Street, he always stopped in, and we would walk the street together. A couple of tenants wondered if I was a cop because of this association, and I did not dissuade them from that line of thinking. Usually on Thursdays I would slide into his patrol car and we would drive over to the local pizza parlor for a slice. There, he would sometimes take out his cell phone, and show me his latest car chase, or takedown, including running down a drug dealer on Knox St, or anything else that happened during the week. I remember him telling me of an upcoming drug bust in which he was going to pose as a college student, and my saying, "Mike, I don't want to know that"...TMI, and I suspect he could have gotten in a lot of trouble for telling me. Over the years, we developed sort of an uncle / nephew relationship, and when he left the Albany cops after three years to join the state police, I sadly felt my nephew had moved away.

I remember one hot summer day a sired police car passed the office, then another, then another....and they pulled into Knox Street. Now they had my attention. Eight cars all together, in the middle of the street, and Mike burst into the office and said he needed the master key. Before long, there were sharpshooters on the roofs, and behind cars, and barricades set up in the roads. Seems a woman with a rifle was let into one of Knox Street buildings with the intent of killing her former boyfriend, who was the father of her child. He had a new girlfriend, whom he was living with on Knox Street. I remember two cops, pistols drawn, entering the building, and after about an hour, seeing the two women and the boyfriend, all in cuffs leaving the building and getting into police cruisers. Officer Mike stopped into the office, told me the full story of what just unfolded...and then of course we went out for a beer and a slice.

Over the next several years, as the neighborhood gentrified, things began to quiet down. Mike was a big part of that....a neighborhood cop, walking around, he knew most the residents and business owners by name...it was good policing. He cared for the community...he had ownership, which is important to any success. And when Mike joined the state police, I hung up my spurs, as it was time to winter in Florida.