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Policing Softly

Boise police nurture community.

By Chelsee Boehm

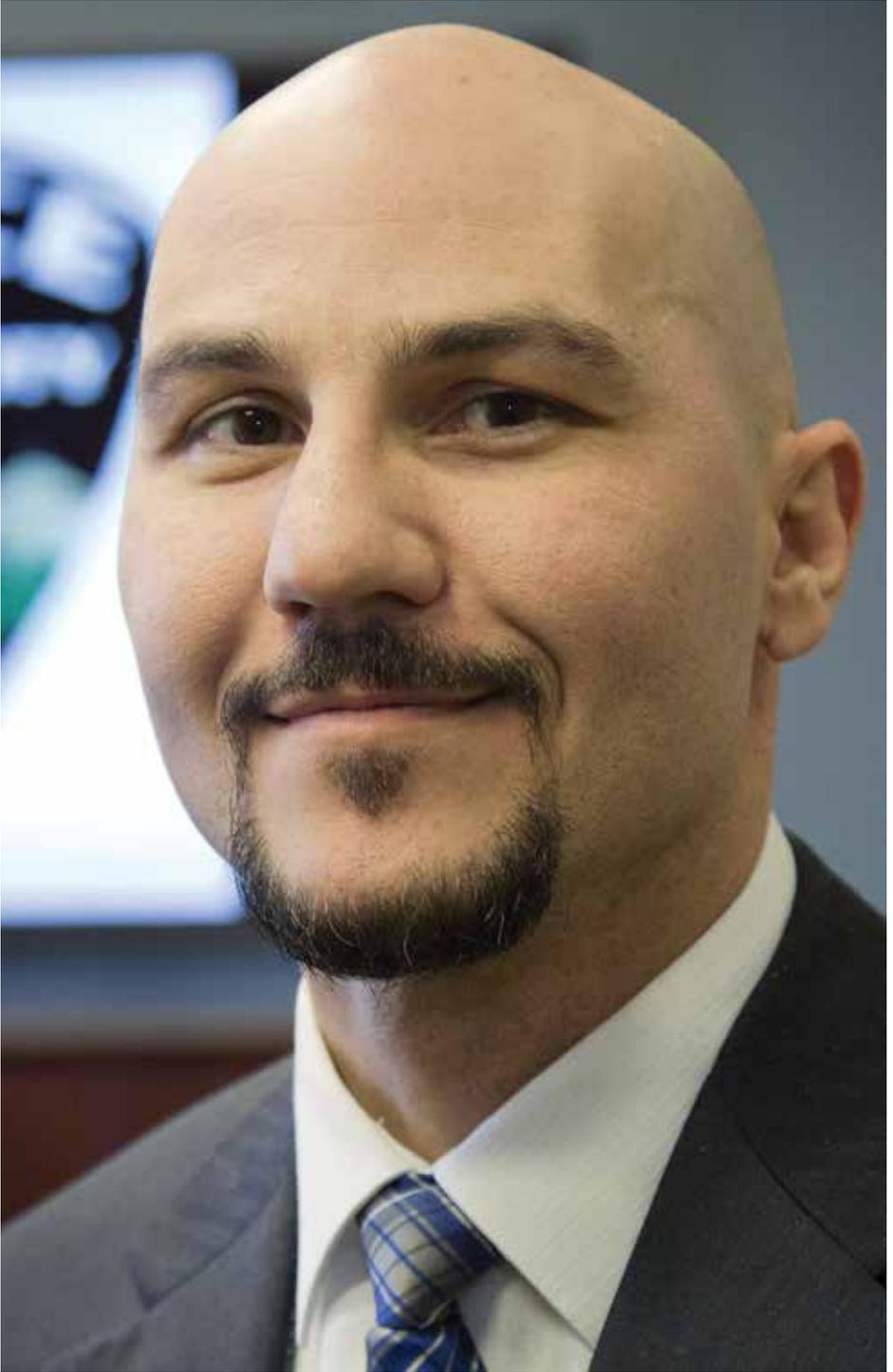
Laws emerge from customs, traditions, and norms. But things Americans take for granted can bewilder people from distant places, and that confusion can lead to terror for people displaced by violence and war. Even routine encounters with law enforcement – a traffic stop, a parking citation – can be terrifying. Without nuanced communication in a common language, there is seldom a foundation of trust.

“Police cars can look intimidating to someone who has been traumatized,” says officer Dustin Robinson of the Boise Police Department, “and the same thing goes with the uniform. It looks paramilitaristic.”

Robinson, an 8-year veteran, is proud to serve as the department’s refugee liaison. Friendly but tough-looking with a shaved head and trim goatee, the policeman does what he can to soften his appearance. He holsters his Glock under his sport coat. He drives an unmarked police car. He relies on interpreters and plenty of patience to solve problems and establish rapport.

The low-key approach is well-suited to a refugee resettlement city. It is also a tribute to a 20-year national trend. Community-oriented policing, now an office of the U.S. Justice Department, became a cornerstone of Clinton-era criminal justice reform. In Boise after seven police shooting incidents in the late 1990s, city council hired a citizen-police ombudsman and took community policing to heart. Gradually the emphasis shifted from confrontation to prevention and education. Foot patrols, a police dog mascot, milk-and-cookie sessions with children, meet-and-greets on Main Street, and dozens of partnership programs were part of the transformation. So was an initiative to cope with Boise’s coming-of-age as a refugee resettlement hub.

Officer Shelli Sonnenberg pioneered the liaison program. Established in 2006 and housed in the department’s Community Outreach Division, the liaison at first was chiefly concerned with barriers that prevented refugees from reporting a crime. “We didn’t know crime was occurring,” Sonnenberg says, recalling the challenge. “In some of the cultures, for example the Somali-Bantu community, the elders took care of the



KATHERINE JONES/IDAHO STATESMAN



Community policing relies on partnerships that build on a foundation of trust.

Previous page: Dustin Robinson, Boise Police Department's refugee liaison, 2016.



Detective Shelli Sonnenberg, 2012

problems. It wasn't a police matter." Police needed that cultural context. Refugees, in turn, needed to know that police could do more than enforce.

"Law enforcement isn't just about making an arrest," says Robinson, who became the liaison when Sonnenberg made detective. In 2016 city historian Chelsee Boehm sat down with Sonnenberg and Robinson for her master's research project on community policing. The interviews, excerpted herein, have been edited for length and clarity. Full transcripts are available in research archives maintained by the Boise City Department of Arts and History.

Chelsee Boehm: Detective Sonnenberg, you served as the refugee and immigrant liaison from 2006 to 2012. How did the program come about?

Shelli Sonnenberg: Most refugees, when they first came over, were living in apartment complexes. We noticed an increase in [minor] theft, such as lawn ornaments and bicycles. Some refugees, I learned, came from camps where anything of importance was kept inside. Well, in the U.S., we leave plants out. We leave chairs out. We leave bicycles out. We leave things like wind chimes out for decoration. Refugees sometimes thought those outside items were things people did not want. We realized that it was better to educate than write people up.

I thought it might be best if a single officer dealt with those specific issues. I wrote up a proposal and brought it to the command staff. There were many civilians who worked with refugees, but no police department had a sworn officer who was dedicated to working with that population.

Who were your sponsors and partners?

SS: I met with the Idaho Office for Refugees, Agency for New Americans, and World Relief. I reached out to the BSU department of social work. I met with Warm Springs Counseling. When the IRC (International Rescue Committee) came to Boise, I brought them on board as well. We used the [Jannus] English Language Center for two-hour classes that taught refugees the law. We started with simple things like how to cross a street.



BOISE POLICE DEPARTMENT

We made mistakes, at first, mostly because of regulations we've put in place ourselves. In the early years when we were bringing in Bosnians and Serbo-Croatians, we put them in the same apartment complexes and schools. War [between them] has gone on for thousands and thousands of years that we, as Americans, don't understand, and we've put their enemy right next door. There was fear of the police. We had no way of knowing who was a refugee and where they were from. Fair housing issues made it hard to ask about nationality. [That problem] opened the door to good conversations with Idaho Housing.

Officer Robinson hands out frozen treats at World Refugee Day, 2016.

Once the communication opened, our network expanded quickly. I can remember going to an apartment complex where refugees had quit flushing the toilet because it had overflowed once. They did not tell anybody, so the overflow damaged the neighbor's apartment below. When the apartment manager told the [refugee] tenants that they needed to report things, the refugees heard something different. They thought they would be kicked out if the toilet overflowed, so they quit flushing it. So, again, it was a matter of education.

How did refugees respond to the police liaison?

SS: I am guessing from their point of view, many of them probably are like, “Okay, so where’s the hitch?” We really created the position as we went, not knowing how best to present it. I spent a lot of time going out to picnics and educational trainings. “If you have a question, call me,” I told them.

Domestic battery was really difficult. I made sure I explained everything ahead of time. If something happens and there is evidence, police have to act. But sometimes, not always, but sometimes, I could educate people in American

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE



The American system of criminal justice can baffle and frustrate newly arrived refugees.

terms. We could communicate [indirectly] by saying, “I have a friend who ...” You know how that happens, right? Sometimes we [hypothetically] worked through the problem. “If this were to happen, this would happen.” It was information they could take back to their “sister” or “friend.” We also worked with case managers saying, “This is what you need to tell your client.” We tried to be very careful with confidentiality issues.

Did refugees have fearful preconceptions about what American police might be like?

SS: I think that was a huge issue, and then on top of that I was a woman, right? [Laughs.] So there’s a lot of corruption, a

lot of fear, a lot of bribing that goes on in many of these other countries. There were offers to bribe when the Bosnians first got here. That's how the police functioned over there. Burmese and the Nepali are fearful because over there you never barter with police. You just do what they said. For the Burundis, the Congolese, and the Somali-Bantu, that uniform was absolutely frightening.

I used to teach the refugee class in full uniform. I knew that I wasn't getting through to them, but when I walked into one of the agencies and somebody that I had had in the class, I could tell their reaction was different. I wasn't quite so scary. Even if I did have a gun on my hip, the uniform, I think, was getting in the way of communicating. [People were] wondering if I am going to arrest them, take them away, or even kill them. So that was one of the first things that I changed.

Sometimes I would bring in a [policeman in a] uniform and ask, "How many times have you shot somebody?" The officer would say, "None." And then I would explain that sometimes we have to pull our gun, but we don't want to hurt anybody. It was not an easy process. We made mistakes. I just want to go back to some of them from the early days and go, "I am sorry, we were doing our best!" [Laughs.]

I can remember when a large Iraqi population arrived, and they were voting on who they were going to appoint to their association. I asked if I could attend the meeting. I sat in the back [in case they had questions]. Having some of the elders ask questions, I think, made it okay for the other people to ask questions. And the funny thing was that the questions they asked are what anybody would ask. "I have four kids," someone would say. "How am I going to support them?" None of the questions were weird.

How did you work to change their perceptions?

SS: Sometimes it was just a matter of making a little effort. I was involved in a program called Kids' Corner. The refugees, when they first get here they get their first shots, but there's a lot of follow up shots. Kids' Corner was a program where Central District Health and the Boise Police Department came together, and we took out a mobile van and went to the



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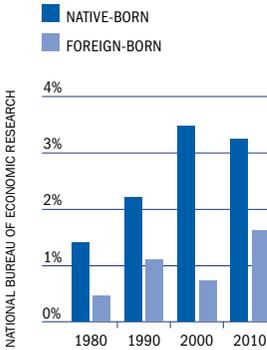
Badges of authority can intimidate and complicate refugee outreach.



BOISE POLICE DEPARTMENT

Officer volunteers at Boise Bicycle Project, 2016.

U.S. Incarceration Rates of Men Age 18-39, by Nativity, 1980-2010



apartment complexes, went door-to-door in the morning and then offered shots in the afternoon to get the people who maybe were unaware that there's follow-up shots for immunization or weren't able to pay for them.

I actually did a health and safety check when refugees were resettled. If there were little kids in the house, I would show them plastic plugs to cover the outlets. So, even though I was a police officer, refugees began to learn that I was there to make them safe.

As you taught refugees about Boise, did they teach you as well?

SS: The job taught me patience. America is very time-driven. "I'll meet with you at 10:00 tomorrow," I'd say, but they only heard "tomorrow," meaning "anytime." In the beginning, it was hard to stay on track. I learned to call the night before and even call in the morning and say, "You need to get on that bus today by 8:00, or you're not going to be here at 10:00."

The job also taught me about other cultures and religions. Growing up in Idaho, when I was in high school, it seemed everybody looked just like me. Nowadays, when you walk down the street, you see diversity. It's amazing. It's encouraged me to get out of my little bubble. I can never tell you that I understand the wars and the fighting, but I know that they occur. I have more compassion. I am amazed by the resiliency and selflessness people have for their families. The job helped me see what's important.

Officer Dustin Robinson, you became the refugee and immigrant liaison after six years with the Boise police in 2012. How did you become a policeman?

Dustin Robinson: I grew up in southeastern Idaho in a small farming and ranching community. My mother was a school teacher and my father was a school psychologist, so I always knew that I wanted to be involved in the community. I wanted to be able to work in a field that had a lot of variety to it, but when I went home at the end of the day, or when I looked back at the end of the career, I would be able to say that I made a difference in my community. Prior to the Boise

Police Department, I worked for the Boise County Sheriff's Department. I did that for two and a half years and then made the transition down to Boise City Police Department.

How smooth was the transition from patrol officer to refugee liaison?

DR: As much as I tried to make it seamless, it had some bumps. Just because someone moves thousands of miles across an ocean doesn't mean they leave behind the scars of trauma and the culture they grew up with. [I needed] to grow as a police officer and a human being, to slow down and learn to include those other cultures.



IDAH0 OFFICE FOR REFUGEES

Celebrating refugee day at Boise City Hall, 2016.

[Many refugees] have never been able to trust law enforcement. They don't understand due process. I'm someone they know and can reach out to. I spend time working within the community to get information that might be relevant to other people's safety. So they may give me information if there is arguments or children misbehaving or parents disciplining children as they would have in their own countries, possibly

not realizing that that it is illegal in the United States and in the state of Idaho.

Over the last year and a half, we've had delegations from Europe come to study our program in Boise. They come to learn how we educate refugees, what tools do we use to prevent crimes from occurring. I have even had members from other police departments come up and job shadow for a couple days to learn what we are doing.



JASON MARGOLIS/PUBLIC RADIO INTERNATIONAL

Officer Robinson, right, greets an Iraqi refugee at his small grocery store in Boise, 2016.

What are some of the biggest challenges?

DR: One of the biggest is having refugees understand that they can turn to law enforcement for service and assistance if they're the victims of crimes. That's difficult to do because they come with years or generations of seeing family members abused by people in power. It is hard to let that fear and trauma go. We've put a lot of positive steps in place to break down those barriers and build trust.

Another challenge is helping individuals learn how our criminal justice process works. Our criminal justice tries to make sure individuals are treated fairly, and that can be slow. It can be confusing and frustrating. We have reassured individuals that something is still happening even if it is not happening quickly.

It takes patience. Different cultures have vastly different beliefs on marriages and family structure. It's not law enforcement's job to force someone to believe in our customs. It is law enforcement's job to make sure that people follow the rules. We have to allow individuals the freedom to express themselves as long as it falls within the laws.

Can you give an example of something illegal in Boise that might be legal somewhere else?

DR: Our driving laws are very strict. Other countries may have traffic laws that are not written down or not strictly enforced. In Boise, even if no one is coming, you can't just drive through a stoplight. How individuals get pulled over for a traffic stop is very different in other parts of the world. We have to teach refugees how to pull a car over and what to do when they get pulled over.

Parenting can also be different in the United States. What is considered child abuse here may be a common form of child discipline in another country.

What have you learned about policing from working with refugees?

DR: I am extremely patriotic. I never thought I took that for granted, but working with individuals from deplorable conditions really makes you appreciate what we have. I have also learned that just because we have done something in our culture for many years doesn't mean that it is the only right way to do something. There are many ways to be good neighbors. Refugees often have strong connections to their communities. In cultures with limited technology, human connections are more important than I had previously realized.



CHELSEE BOEHM holds a master's degree in applied history from BSU. An employee with the Boise City Department of Arts & History, she specializes in oral history and museum work. Todd Shallat contributed to this chapter.