



# UNDERSTANDING THE POLICE

INTERVIEW BY PEAK JOHNSON

I've never talked to a police officer before, mainly because I never had a reason to. It never really came to mind, even when working on previous issues. Luckily for me, Mr. Donnie Wiggs referred me to a gentleman who is seen around our community many times, even stopping traffic so that members of the K-6 program could get to the swimming pool this summer. I would like to introduce police officer and minister Curtis Ghee, of the 22nd district.

"He was born and raised in North Philly, and never forgot where he came from," a friend of Officer Ghee wrote in a recent article in the *Philadelphia Daily News*. He was highlighted as a neighborhood hero who goes above and beyond what is asked of him as a Philadelphia police officer. We had an opportunity to sit down with him to ask him about life as a police officer and the epidemic of violence that plagues our streets.

**NPM: What made you want to become a police officer?**

OG: I actually had three uncles who were on the job. They came back on in the seventies actually, and my father, he was a supervisor up at the prisons. Law enforcement was always in my family, but ironically I really wasn't interested in it. My uncle convinced myself and my nephew in 1990 to take the [Civil Service] test, so I took the test and when I took the test I started to meet other officers. I gained an interest in becoming a police officer after meeting other police officers. I pretty much was at a dead end job at a nursing home and knew this would be a better career.

**NPM: What's a normal day for a police officer?**

OG: A normal day for a police officer can be from one end of the spectrum to the other. Your day can start off with a cup of coffee, a newspaper, just talking on the phone, whatever. It can go from that extreme, to all hell breaking loose. Generally in my thirteen years as a police officer, "Day Work," which is usually the 8-4 shift, there is usually not much going on. Minor disturbances, disputes at stores or schools, but now [we're seeing] a lot of shootings. The life of an officer on the street is unpredictable.

**NPM: Why do you think there are so many African Americans committing these crimes?**

OG: I truly believe that no one is just born bad, nobody just wakes up bad. It's a process. I grew up here in North Philly over at 30th and Master; I've seen the transformation from the early seventies to the early nineties. When I was coming up, there were different values. People went to school. There weren't a lot of single parent homes.

A lot of things have changed. The economy is a factor, education is a factor. Lack of education, I believe, leads to a low self-esteem. I believe a lot of these young guys and girls out here don't think much of their lives and they don't expect much. Take something as small as coming out of your house and throwing trash on the ground. That might not be a crime to someone, but that says something about that person. They have a low expectation of where they live, they have a low expectation of where they're going, and many of them are following in the paths of people who preceded them.

**NPM: Do you think role models should be blamed for this?**

OG: There are all different factors. Parenting yes, that's definitely one [factor]. I had three sisters and one brother. I was the youngest, my mom and dad were together and they both

worked. My dad was a drinker, even though he was a sergeant up at the prison, and that affected me in a sense, it affected our relationship. So when you have a parent that isn't right or doing right by you, it does affect you in some way, you shut down or you might become aggressive or you might follow in their footsteps.

Unfortunately in this day and time so many of our young people are born as crack babies or they're born and they witnessed their mother on drugs or their father in prison or on drugs. So the parenting thing, we can say that everything starts at home, but what if the home is minus the father, plus your mother who's strung out on drugs, what kind of start does a child have? So yes, parenting is a big part of this.

**NPM: Do you think that peace will come to this community?**

OG: Honestly, I don't believe it's going to happen. It can happen and eventually it will, but not now. I say that, because we look at all the stuff that's going on, problems in the school and problems in our neighborhood. The police commissioner who I think is great, the mayor who I think is great with a lot of these issues, they are doing what they're supposed to do. But it's all bigger than them, it's bigger than the police department and its bigger than the mayor. I truly believe that it's going to take a spiritual intervention. I always recite this saying: "It's not the hand that makes a man stiff, but the mind that controls makes his hand stiff." We can lock folks up and throw away the key and fifty people will take that person's place, if you don't change their way of thinking. I do prison ministry and they're into it, I don't know what the turn-around is when they come out, but that's the only thing that's going to change this community or any other community.

**NPM: Do you think if we had more officers around, it would reduce the amount of violence we experience in Philadelphia?**

OG: We've attempted to do that and I think it's great. Even when we did operation Safe Streets back in 2002, to be out there on the corner as tired as I was, I felt good because people would be out fixing their little gardens. It felt good, it was worth the sacrifice, but if I'm at 23rd and Berks then somebody is getting assaulted on 25th and Diamond, how effective is that? More police is a good thing, we could use a thousand more police, but would it solve the issue?

It seems like there are so many people to deal with and we have to start reforming the people. They're going into prison and they're coming back, some of them have good hearts and good intentions and actually want to make a difference, but [by going to prison] they put themselves at a disadvantage. When you come out with a felony [conviction] it's hard to get a job. This is what the police department is faced with, a revolving door. We can put away thousands of people in a year's time and the justice system slaps them on the wrist and sends them back on the street.

So it makes our job more difficult because now you have a more seasoned criminal, now you have a person who says, "Well, I can't go back to jail because if I go back I'm going to have to that time, I'm going to have to do ten years," and things of that nature. Now you have a more aggressive criminal. It makes our job more difficult, so therefore even if we had more officers, all we have is more people to lock more people up and

these people are coming right back out onto the street. Even those who might get life in prison, there's always someone to take their place, who'll say, "I'm going to take over where he left off, he got too greedy, and I wouldn't do it that way."

**NPM: Did you hear about the police substation that's supposed to be on the corner of 23rd street?**

OG: The idea has been kicked around and that's something our captain would have to agree to. He's all about working with this community, it'd probably have to get clearance through the police commissioner. It goes without saying that this is definitely an area that could use a mini station. It would come down to who we could get to man that station. Maybe just two or three officers. That would be a commander's decision, but a good idea in my book.

**NPM: What do you think about the "Stop Snitching" saying?**

OG: This is a tough one, [my opinion] is from a police officer perspective and as a human being. I say you pick and choose your battles. If you honestly feel that your life is in danger, you're just going to have to weigh your options. I believe that you either die from the mumps or the measles, [in the same way] it's either you snitch and somebody kills you or you don't snitch and you let these cats do what they want to do and then you wind up getting shot in a drive-by anyway.

**We can put away thousands of people in a year's time and the justice system slaps them on the wrist and sends them back on the street.**

I say at some point you have to stand for something or fall for anything. I'm understanding and sympathetic to the fear factor, but my opinion is if I don't say something, I'm still going to be in fear anyway. So it's like the Faheem Childs situation, the night before there were a lot of gun shots in that area and no one picked up the phone to call 911. Then, with almost a hundred thousand dollars in reward money, no one would speak up. I understand the fear, but at some point you say, "Okay, they stole my neighbor's car. I know who did it, but I'm not going to get involved." But to see a baby shot in the head who didn't deserve it [and not say something]? At some point somebody has to say "You know, the heck with it. I don't care what they say. I don't care what they do to me. I'm saying something."

It's either you hang in there and you keep getting knocked upside the head, or you actually do something. I believe that people need to speak up or just lie there and take it. And they use that term "snitch" like you're doing something wrong. It blows my mind that we live in a time when it's okay being seen talking to a drug dealer, but you don't want to be seen talking to the police. Somebody needs to change that. The bad guys pretty much have taken over, we're going to live by their rules, so I don't want to be seen talking to the police. If you back down then you're living in fear. They've got you. It's like someone has moved into your house, painted the walls a different color and took the furniture and drapes. You either stand for something or you lie down and die.

**NPM: What do you think of the Guardian Angels?**

OG: I like them, I don't know a lot about them, but their mission is not to just lay back and watch people take over their community. They know that they can't stop crime. They know that they have to be careful because they don't carry weapons, but the fact that they're willing to step up, I have no problem

**The first hip hop DJ was Clive Campbell a.k.a. Kool Herc of the South Bronx. The first recording put together by a rap group was the SUGAR HILL GANG with RAPPER'S DELIGHT.**