

Challenge and Response: W.S.U. and Violence, 1977

by R. P. Bird
rpbird.com

Copyright © 1992, 2013 by R. P. Bird. All rights reserved. Permission granted for individual use only, not for profit, resale, or publishing without the consent of the author.

Challenge and Response: WSU and Violence, 1977

She had gone downstairs to do her laundry, leaving the notes for her Sunday School class next to her Bible in her room. Julie Ladd's body was found in a storage room in the basement of Brennan III residence hall the next day, Sunday, May 15, 1977, shortly after noon. Julie had been stabbed to death. She was to move home that day. The police had no leads on the murderer, and would have none for the next eight years.

The murder occurred during the last days of Finals Week at Wichita State University (Wichita, Kansas), when few people were left on campus or in the dormitories; of the 65 women in Brennan III, most had already moved out.¹ As a result, the initial reaction from students was muted. The chief of WSU's police department, Milton Myers, requested and received the complete support of the Wichita Police Department in the investigation — the Wichita Police Department's homicide squad took over coordination of the case.² Apparent from the first was the contribution of shoddy security at the residence halls to the murder. "WSU officers periodically check outside doors and remove objects that keep the doors from locking. [WSU Police Chief Milton Myers] said he and other officers have warned residents about leaving the doors open."³ Officers on patrol would often find doors propped open, and would close them, only to have the doors propped open again later.⁴ The night of the murder, a residence hall employee found an outside door propped open with a brick.⁵

The social environment of the campus at that time was very relaxed, the concern over crime very low among most of the campus community. It was an

¹ Wichita Eagle, 16 May 1977, 1C.

² Kate McLemore, "Brennan III Minus 1," Sunflower, Wichita State University campus newspaper, 29 August 1977, 1.

³ Wichita Eagle, 16 May 1977, 3C.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David C. McCullough, detective sergeant, WSU Police Department, interview by author, taken from notes, WSU, Wichita, Kansas, 2 November 1992.

atmosphere where "freedom of academics"⁶ was paramount, where freshmen or first year students were to be treated as adults, their lives enriched by the "newfound responsibility"⁷ of life away from home or in an adult learning environment. It viewed itself as a small isolated community inside the large metropolitan area of Wichita, Kansas.⁸ Until the late sixties there had not even been a real campus police department, only a glorified night watch, on patrol with a time clock. During the Vietnam era, the term police was to be avoided, too confrontational, too much like the real world, too Establishment: the campus police adopted the name WSU Security and Traffic. The word "Security" was a soft sell, selected to be so by the university administration.⁹ Gotta avoid looking like The Man. As a result, people viewed the campus police as a joke; cooperation with other law enforcement agencies was complicated by their disregard for the campus police.¹⁰ There was a lack of serious attention paid to recommendations coming from the campus police, since they were, after all, not police. Members of the police department felt this attitude from the faculty and the administration was worse than no help at all. Faculty members thought that nothing bad could ever happen on a college campus, or wondered why campus police should be allowed to carry guns; some of the faculty thought policemen equipped as policemen were inappropriate to a university environment.¹¹ This attitude is apparent in a letter in the 2 September 1977 issue of the campus newspaper, written in response to coverage of the murder and related issues.

Your decision to carry a lead story on campus murders on the opening day of classes strikes me as one of the most tactless and tasteless editorial judgments ever. . . . it seems monumentally inappropriate to blight the enthusiasm and sense of new beginnings of our students by fright tactics and by implying that

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Milton Myers, former Chief of Police, WSU Police Department, interview by author, taken from notes, Derby, Kansas, 4 November 1992.

¹⁰ McCullough interview. Myers interview.

¹¹ McCullough interview.

not everything possible is being done to bring the Ladd case to conclusion. "For everything there is a time and season," and I submit that your timing on this one could hardly have been poorer.¹²

The author was the Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. How naive and innocent her letter now seems. Who would now even dream of criticizing a college newspaper for relaying information on campus crime?

The impact of the murder on the faculty and students at WSU was not immediate, since most students had already left for the summer. A brief news article in a summer school issue of the college paper on 9 June reported no progress in the investigation.¹³

Chief Myers and others knew that this was only a postponement, worry and outright fear would resurface again in the fall. Milton Myers had been appointed Chief of Security in August 1975. He had been at WSU, in the department as Assistant Chief, for five years before that. He and members of the department had been concerned about safety issues before he became chief; the relaxed atmosphere on campus was "great, except for outside criminal elements coming on campus, and how to protect the individual [freshmen and other students], how do you protect the people from [the] outside criminal coming in?"¹⁴ The department knew there were people out there with the potential for violence, who would view the campus as a "shopping center for criminals."¹⁵ The campus dormitories were a particular concern, since WSU had a different dormitory environment than other universities. Due to its commuter character, there was no extensive experience at WSU in dealing with dorm security.

Myers set up specific goals to try to accomplish while chief. He was determined to upgrade the image of his department through a name change.

¹² Jacqueline Snyder, letter to the editor, *Sunflower*, 2 September 1977, 4.

¹³ "No Progress Reported in Murder Investigation," *Sunflower*, 9 June 1977, 2.

¹⁴ McCullough interview.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

With help recruited from inside the university administration, the change was presented to the Board of Regents, who approved it in 1976. The department name was changed to the Wichita State University Police Department. The name change affected the way other police agencies viewed the department. Getting information was no longer a hassle, it could be more easily obtained, especially with the Wichita Police Department. The internal identity of the campus police department changed as well, they began to view themselves as police officers, not glorified nightwatchmen. The department obtained a computer, making information access even easier. Myers then submitted a proposal in 1976 to deal with lax security at the dorms and at other campus buildings. He was attracted to card reader technology that had already been deployed at other universities. A read-strip would be installed next to certain doors, entry gained only after running an ID card with a magnetic backing through the read-strip. A proven technology, but too expensive a step for an administration that saw no need for improvements in security. Nothing had happened, why spend the money? The few alarm systems in place on campus protected money, not people.¹⁶ The campus phone system was also in need of improvement, on rainy days the line to the WSU police station would short out. This even occurred the night of the murder.¹⁷ Student dispatchers were already in place, and one student who patrolled on bicycle from 5 - 10 p.m. No money existed to add others to this student patrol. The resources available to Myers were very limited. These puny resources to protect an urban university set in the heart of one of the high-crime districts of Wichita.

The murder changed all that. The need for change was finally acted upon. Too late for Julie, though. Over the summer, David Marvin, then Dean of Student Life, Chief Myers, and several student representatives toured various other college campuses in the area. At Kansas Newman, the local Catholic college, they found that the dorms had alarms and strict rules on security for the

¹⁶ Myers interview.

¹⁷ Wichita Eagle, 16 May 1977, 3C.

students living there. A new dorm alarm with a ringer at the WSU police station was installed prior to the fall semester. Other measures were in place by or during the fall: check-in desks and lobby phones were established in the dorms, use of only one door after 6 p.m., a twenty-four-hour student patrol in Brennan III, a combination student and officer patrol in other student housing, a shuttle bus to transport students to and from the dorms and the campus, and the student patrol program expanded (or created, since one guy on a bike does not constitute a program).¹⁸

Myers received appropriations from the state legislature, \$75,000 to start up the student patrol, called the cadet program, in the summer of 1977. The cadets were equipped with radios and walked beat areas from 6 p.m. to the close of the university library; on Saturdays and Sundays the cadets were reduced to two. As the campus expanded, Myers added to the program, hiring additional evening cadet patrol personnel, the numbers rising to twelve. The cadet patrols in the dorms during the day were eventually cut, though the evening dorm patrols remained in place. Myers has credited the cadet program with the low crimes-against-persons rate on the WSU campus; previous to the cadet program, purse-snatching was common on campus, which ended when the cadets caught a few of the thieves. Myers considered the relations between the campus community and the WSU police to have improved immensely just from the cadets.¹⁹

Friction arose from the changes. Chief Myers recommended to the student housing administration that students should be forced by strict rules to comply with security measures, to eliminate the attitude of sacrificing security for convenience. His department was forthcoming with stringent new standards for the dorms; unfortunately, the dorms were never operated that tightly. "You'd like to believe . . . if I made a recommendation, it would be listened to," Myers lamented.²⁰ Resistance to the new alarms and the security measures

¹⁸ Myers interview.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

came principally from the older students. Chief Myers thought at the time that such resistance would fade in about three years, as the older students left and were replaced by new students unfamiliar with the looser, older ways. Some measure of personal security was finally achieved on campus. To Chief Myers, the shock over the murder was responsible for the origin of the cadet program. "A hard way to get money."²¹

Julie Ladd's murder shocked a lot of people. Every lead the police developed led nowhere, frustrating those involved in the investigation. This lack of progress intensified feelings of insecurity on campus, which not only showed up in articles in the campus newspaper, but in behavior. The campus police received more than one report of girls carrying guns in their purses, in several cases the guns reported were .45 service autos, not exactly pocket pistols.²² A lot of denial took place, which in some cases continues to this day. Hard to credit the belief in the murder as an isolated event with very minimal effect, with no safety questions arising from it, as the current Dean of Students stated to the author.²³ The campus paper featured articles in the first week of the fall semester, which drew severe criticism in the letter mentioned previously. Some excerpts:

Questions arise as to whether murders on college campuses can be prevented or if campus police can play a role in helping to avert the types of tragedies that befell Julie Ladd.²⁴

At WSU, there will be some changes. Thomas Gavin, director of housing, said that alarms will be installed on all exit doors. In the past one officer was assigned to all night duty at Fairmount

²¹ Ibid. A murder on campus does get attention. Myers hoped other campuses could learn from WSU's experience and not wait until there was a tragedy before acting. Myers is supported in his belief that the reaction to the murder was responsible for funding for the cadet program; this is also the view of Det. Sgt. McCullough.

²² McCullough interview.

²³ James J. Rhatigan, Dean of Students and Vice President of Student Affairs, WSU, interview by author, taken from notes, WSU, Wichita, Kansas, 3 November 1992.

²⁴ Judy Moulos, "Campus Murders: Can They Be Avoided?," Sunflower, Wichita State University campus newspaper, 29 August 1977, 1.

Towers. There will now be someone assigned night duty at Brennan.

Gavin said there will also be student monitors who will use walkie-talkies to stay in direct contact with campus police.

Campus police will be working with dormitory students.

"We have support that didn't exist before," Myers, chief of WSU security, said. "I've seen new support coming from the student groups that wasn't there before because there wasn't any need for it."

Precaution is often taken after tragedy occurs.²⁵

As a means of crime prevention, Chief Milt [sic] Myers said he would like to see a computerized operation instituted.

Myers explained that students could be issued cards which would be specifically coded so that the cards which would be utilized in a number of ways.

Dormitory students would receive a card for their residence halls. When the card is placed in a special slot in the door, the computer is activated, unlocks the door, and allows the student entry. If the card is lost or stolen, the student would report the loss and that card would be erased from the computer's memory bank. The card would no longer be functional to anyone who would subsequently have the card in his or her possession.

Dr. Dae H. Chang, head of the Administration of Justice Department said that he does not see the computerized system as any kind of real solution.

Chang said it is his belief that sophistication in law enforcement techniques is generally countered by sophistication in the criminal's technique. Chang explained it as the old game of cops and robbers. Chang does not believe there is a way to prevent murder and described the situation as a "nightmare."²⁶

The motive for Julie's murder is not known. However, the motive for the initial full scale investigation by the three [police] units seems obvious — [public] pressure.

²⁵ Ibid., 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

"Comment from the homicide squad is the same at the end of the summer as it was at the beginning. "There have been no new developments."²⁷

To have such a statement from Chang, head of a department at WSU, strongly implying that nothing can or will be done to prevent another murder on campus, could only encourage the perception that the campus administration was seriously disengaged from the issue of campus security. Almost as if the university administration wanted the students to be afraid. That same week, an ad for a Tae Kwon-Do martial arts school appeared in the campus paper, "Protect yourself from danger," it read.²⁸

Perception lags behind reality. Action had been taken, and would continue to be taken, at the prompting of concerned individuals. These steps were eventually successful in reducing anxiety over personal security on campus; so much so, the old problems at Brennan began appearing again several years later: lax security attitude from the students, using the wrong doors, and even alarm wires disconnected.²⁹ Still, the environment had changed. The university had a real police department, budgeted at levels high enough to field an effective deterrent, and finally taken seriously by the administration. Security measures were in place and, despite occasional lapses, were used. The campus was safer.

All the new security measures couldn't bring Julie Ladd back to life. Her killer was still at large. Julie's mother was left only with the memories of a loving daughter who was a good student, taught Sunday School, and had a bright future ahead of her.³⁰ The police never forget. There were no leads for almost eight years, until a burglary suspect wanted to cut a deal with the Wichita police. The murderer was Leonard Bell, then serving time in Colorado for another murder. In 1977, he had bragged of the murder to four people, telling them

²⁷ McLemore, "Brennan III Minus 1," 2.

²⁸ Sunflower, 31 August 1977, 10.

²⁹ McCulough interview.

³⁰ McLemore, "Brennan III Minus 1," 1.

details of the murder scene only the murderer could know. Julie Ladd had gone to the basement of Brennan to do laundry, Bell had entered the building in order to steal to support his drug habit. Julie was in the wrong place at the wrong time.³¹ Bell went on to commit an almost identical crime years later — and how should those who stayed silent feel, who by their silence murdered a woman in Colorado? They were not silent in court, Bell was convicted on March 27, 1985,³² and sentenced several weeks later to a consecutive life sentence. He will be at least 75 before eligible for parole. "I think he's gotten what he deserved, and he deserves to be forgotten now," [Assistant District Attorney] Puntch said."³³

The world changes while we are slow to see it. Was the WSU administration at fault for not funding the proposals put forward by Chief Myers in 1976? Yes, but guilty with extenuating circumstances. They acted like most humans do, not facing a change until it was necessary to do so, not recognizing a threat until it was upon them. Like villagers living on the slope of a volcano who ignore the strange foreign geologist telling them to move, they chose to ignore the warnings of Milton Myers and others. All too human. Perhaps I am too hard on them, perhaps it is the place they ruled, a learned place, aimed at the future — rulers of such a place ought to be more forward-looking, ought to use more sophisticated mental tools. They could not move beyond the most basic type of decision-making, challenge-and-response. Perhaps I am disappointed at the knowledge they are just as dumb as the rest of us.

.....
A graduate paper from my bygone days of yore, part of a collection of papers my seminar did on the history of W.S.U. This was written during my "noir phase," so it is understandable dark in its assessments. It was published, I recall, don't know exactly where. That's what a tornado does to you, it erases your ability to consult the past...at least the past before I entered everything in my PC.

³¹ McCullough interview. "4 Knew Killer's ID, County Says," Wichita Eagle, 20 March 1985, 1D.

³² "Jury Convicts Bell in Student's Death," Wichita Eagle, 28 March 1985, 1A.

³³ "Bell Receives Life Sentence for Murder," Wichita Eagle, 11 April 1985, 1D.

R. P. Bird
December 2013
rpbird.com

Copyright © 1992, 2013 by R. P. Bird. All rights reserved. Free for personal use.