

Local community tackles issues surrounding Ferguson



Residents of Ferguson, Mo., advocate for change in policing practices and justice for Michael Brown after he was shot and killed in the street by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson on Aug. 9, 2014.

BY CLARE FORRISTER
STAFF WRITER

At approximately 12:01 p.m. on Aug. 9, 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson.

Even now as the United States, including Greensboro, reacts to Brown's death and decides what it means for the country, the sounds of those six gunshots reverberate.

Wilson is under investigation, but at present, the details of the encounter remain dubious.

Eyewitness accounts have provided conflicting information, and no conclusive proof has emerged as to whether Brown provoked the officer physically or submitted with his hands in the air.

Regardless of what really happened, the effects of Brown's death on the nation are undeniable. Hundreds of protestors gathered on the streets of Ferguson claiming that the officer's behavior was a result of prejudice against Brown as a black male.

Now the protests have died down, but the conversations sparked nationwide about police brutality, profiling and accountability have not.

Guilford College held a panel on community and police accountability on Sept. 5 in the community center. The panelists covered the events in Ferguson and the importance of police accountability in Greensboro.

At the panel, James Shields, director of the Bonner Center for Community Service, related his first encounter with a police officer when he was a teenager. He was pulled over,

and the police officer reached for his gun despite the fact Shields had done nothing wrong.

"(I began to understand) what it means to be a black man in America," said Shields. "To actually have it happen to me ... (I really felt) as if my life was in danger."

Barbara Lawrence, associate professor of justice and policy studies, spoke on the panel from her experience as a former police officer, explaining the rules of engagement. According to Lawrence, officers are trained in protocols to de-escalate situations, but problems persist.

"One of the problems that we see consistently across the country ... is consistent patterns of blatant racial profiling that have a serious impact on communities of color," said Lawrence. "At some point, we have to find better ways to find police officers more accountable."

Will Pizio, associate professor of justice and policy studies, disagreed with the panelists about the extent of police misconduct.

"Police brutality, contrary to popular opinion, is a very rare occurrence," said Pizio. "Is it a problem? Yes. Are there policies in place to prevent that excessive force? Absolutely. Body cameras, dash cams, recording devices, civilian review, internal affairs, all those types of things Police accountability is probably at its best right now."

Pizio claims that profiling is rare as well.

"If you deny that racial profiling occurs, then you're living in a hole somewhere. But most of the cops out there are law-abiding. They're honest. They're trying to do the right thing."

However, Pizio did comment that the police can always

do better.

"The police in Greensboro have had problems regarding accountability for years," said Pizio. However, the outgoing police chief, Ken Miller, has made progress by listening to concerns and making internal efforts for accountability. For instance, supervisors are now held accountable for the misconduct of the officers.

Greensboro residents, both within the police department and outside it, are making efforts to improve police accountability.

Two of the speakers from Friday's panel serve on an interim citizens' police review committee: David Allen, a community organizer at Beloved Community Center, and Lawrence.

Lawrence expects that the committee, once established permanently, will make a difference in police accountability in Greensboro.

"Folks in the community will be able to have an unbiased look at some of these complaints," said Lawrence.

However, she commented that this cannot occur unless the police cooperate with the committee.

No matter to what extent police are abusing their power, all sides seem to agree that improvement is needed.

As Allen pointed out, major change starts when people work on issues locally, which is more successful than leaving Greensboro to protest in Ferguson.

As panelist Lorenzo Meachum explained, though Greensboro is victim to "white, patriarchal domination" — like the rest of the country — Guilford has the possibility to bring change.

Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and similar groups turn to the Internet for recruitment

BY CARLTON SKINNER
STAFF WRITER

The recent explosion of popularity and use of social media and networking websites like Twitter and Facebook, has completely altered the way information spreads across the globe. However, whether or not this change is a good or bad thing remains to be seen.

"Any change of this magnitude has positive and negative aspects," said Diane Norman, the managing editor for the

Hendersonville Times-News. "I think it is wonderful that people, in what we consider to be (developing nations) countries or oppressed societies, can now communicate with the outside world, (but) these communications have the potential to be tools of terror."

Indeed, three years ago, the United States' Department of Homeland Security made the discovery that Jihadi militants had begun attempting to recruit new fighters to their cause via avenues such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition to being

the tools of violent organizations, al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters are now maintaining an active web presence. Some fighters even have followers who number in the thousands.

Through romanticized tweets espousing the ideals and goals of these groups, as well as other visual propaganda such as photographs of masked fighters armed with machine guns, groups like al-Qaeda hope to entice young American sympathizers.

In an interview with NPR in Dec. 2011, William McCants, from the Center of Naval Analyses, stated that these attempts were an interesting new outlet for terrorist groups but that ultimately, they appeared to be a complete disaster for them as well.

However Dina Temple-Raston, NPR's counter-terrorism correspondent, said terror groups are less interested in pinpointing recruits than broadcasting information across the Internet where many more potential fighters may see it.

"It's not about accuracy. It's about immediacy," said Temple-Raston.

Whether or not these tactics are successful, the questions remain. Do websites like these have an ethical responsibility to uphold? Or should Twitter and Facebook be monitoring and alerting the United States government to activity such as al-Qaeda recruiting on the web?

Opinions on this issue are mixed.

"Yes, I think that they do have an ethical responsibility to make it harder for terrible people with odious viewpoints to use their sites to attract and encourage likeminded people," said Vance Ricks, associate professor of philosophy. "But I'm really not

sure that I'm right about that."

"After all, to whom would they have that responsibility? Would it be to the other users and account holders? Would it be to the governments of the countries where the jihadist fighters and organizers live or fight? Would it be to humanity at large? Would it be to their own vision of the kind of space they want to create?"

Some feel that monitoring and reporting suspicious activity online would be an infringement of our First Amendment rights.

"Facebook and Twitter are like AT&T — they carry the signals," said Norman. "I don't think it's appropriate in our free society for these communications to be screened or censored. (It is) incumbent of the users to behave in an ethical manner. It isn't the government's duty."

On the other hand, some people feel differently about censorship and the government's role in this process.

"I'm all for the First Amendment, free speech and all, but neither Facebook, Twitter or the Department of Homeland Security are doing their jobs effectively if they are not policing the web for this sort of thing," said Erin Skinner, a senior web analyst with ROI Revolution.

"Users of these websites are not the ones with an ethical responsibility. The government is the one who should be on the look out."

With the recent growth of groups like the Islamic State and their sophisticated use of social media, the government may have to make their decision — whatever it may be — very soon.



COURTESY OF CODY MILLS/THE CHRONICLE