

FORUM

Facing 'Officer Friendly' while Black



Lee Daniels
Guest Columnist

Without the video, North Charleston, S.C. police officer Michael T. Slager would likely have gotten away

“If you [profanity] with me, I’m going to break your leg before you get the chance to run.”

—Police Officer

with murder. Without the video, we wouldn’t see Officer Michael T. Slager have the, shall we say, presence of mind, to quickly retrieve what appears to be his Taser and plant it beside the lifeless body of Walter Lamar Scott.

Without the video, Officer Michael T. Slager would no doubt have quickly been coached on the techniques of making himself appear in news media interviews the victim of the lethal encounter with the Black man he killed, 50-year-old Walter Lamar Scott.

Without the video, the conservative punditocracy and talk-show jockeys would be raging that the dead man’s action again proved that Black and Brown civilians are “waging war” on police.

But we have the video — one of the technological innovations that increasingly have helped suggest what people of color face from an alarming number of White cops — and the first-degree murder indictment of Officer Michael T. Slager.

And so we are faced with a long list of powerful questions: Why did Slager pull over Walter Lamar Scott’s vehicle? Was it

really for a broken taillight? Or, was it because Slager, feeding off the power of his badge, wanted to show some Black person — any Black person — who’s boss? What, then, was going through Slager’s mind that led him to not give chase to the unarmed, slow-footed Scott when he ran, but quickly and calmly pull his gun and fire eight times at the fleeing man?

I think some part of the answer to these questions and the many others that must be asked can be found in a recent instance of a police encounter with Black teenagers that did not escalate to violence but was nonetheless revealing.

That incident — captured on a police car camera — occurred in Minneapolis March 18. Four Black teens of Somali descent, having just finished playing basketball at the YMCA, were driving home when they were pulled over by the police for making a U-turn. The police ordered the youths out of the car at gunpoint and handcuffed them, while they searched the car and ran background checks on the car to see if it was stolen and on the youths to see if any had criminal records. They found nothing.

None of the youths had a criminal record, and they were subsequently not charged.

But at the beginning of this hour-long ordeal, a police camera captured this exchange between one of the police officers and one of the youths he was handcuffing: “Plain and simple,” the officer says, “If you [profanity] with me, I’m going to break your leg before you get the chance to run.”

The youth responds, “I never said I was going to run.”

The officer answers back, “I’m just giving you a heads up. Just trying to be Officer Friendly right now.”

“Can you tell me,” the youth persists, “Why I’m being arrested?”

The officer responds, “Because I feel like arresting you.”

Is that it: that some White cops’ need to show these “colored people” a White man can control their freedom whenever he “feels like” it?

Is that attitude why Officer Michael T. Slager pulled over the vehicle driven by Walter Lamar Scott? In the aftermath of

Scott’s murder, some Black North Charleston residents have said that police constantly racially profile Black drivers there. Comedian Chris Rock’s recent social-media posting of his being repeatedly stopped by police while driving near his suburban New Jersey home suggests that, for Black and Brown drivers, that otherwise legitimate police duty remains laced with racist intent.

Further, we can go down the long, long list of just recent, controversial White cop-black or brown civilian encounters and ask is that why so many of them have a palpable undertone of menace: Is it because the White cops are acting on their “feelings?”

A final question: How often does a Black or brown person’s chance of surviving an encounter with a White cop come down to whether that officer or those officers have decided to be or not be “Officer Friendly” at that moment?

To put that another way: How often does it come down to whether the police officer or officers have decided at that moment to be a public servant of integrity, or a criminal?

Lee A. Daniels is a longtime journalist based in New York City. His essay, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Great Provocateur,” appears in Africa’s Peacemakers: Nobel Peace Laureates of African Descent (2014), published by Zed Books. His new collection of columns, Race Forward: Facing America’s Racial Divide in 2014, is available at www.ama-zon.com.

The root causes of unhealthy communities



Keith Elder
Guest Columnist

healthy life begins in childhood, and factors such as child abuse or neglect, lack of high-quality medical care, personal behavior, viruses/bacteria, stress, and environmental pollution increase the risk of illness and premature death.

But additional threats identified by underserved Americans include living in segregated neighborhoods, where there is often less access to health care facilities, quality education, full-service grocery stores, and recreational outlets.

Many studies describe the influences of community structures on the chronic stress that many racial, ethnic and lower socioeconomic groups experience. Witness the recent devastation of communities lacking equitable social, economic, and policy structures.

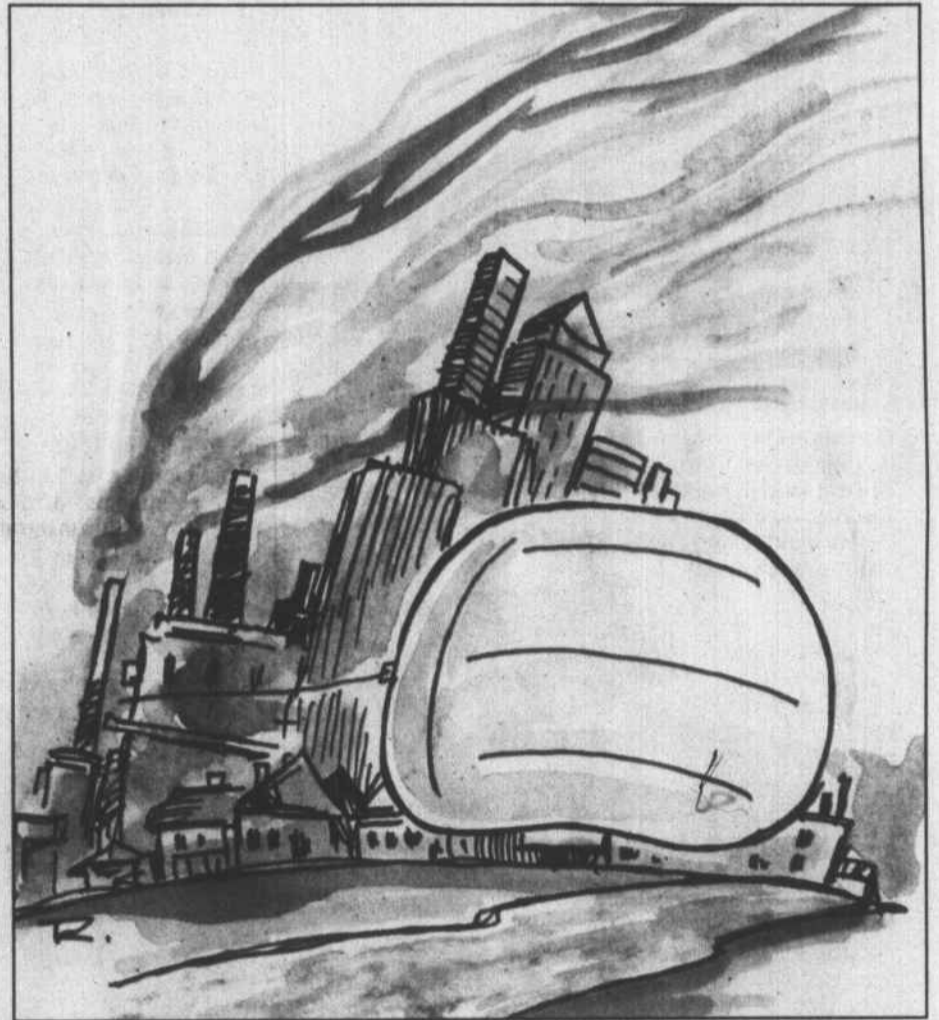
The factors that prevent low-income communities and communities of color from accessing health care also prevent them from accessing other valuable resources that decrease the risk for poor health. Poor-quality housing, limited public transportation, high crime rates, and other

socially disrupted conditions reduce sense of community, access to health care, and the ability to manage chronic diseases properly.

Children suffer the most damaging effects of these inequities. Poor childhood experiences and exposures can lead to poor adulthood outcomes, as the unhealthy circumstances that negatively affect children have a similar impact on adults and lead to concentrated poverty and unhealthy communities.

We know that eating fruits and vegetables, reducing stress, limiting consumption of fast food, and limiting alcohol, sports drinks, and sugar-sweetened beverages will help to improve health. On a broader scale, however, the environments we live in should offer access to healthy food, reduced exposure to drugs, less environmental pollution, greater access to quality medical care, and more economic opportunities through jobs.

We need a greater emphasis on improving our social, economic, and living environments so that all Americans can be healthy



from childhood to adulthood.

Keon L. Gilbert, DrPH, MA, MPA, is an assistant professor in the Department of Behavioral Science & Health Education at Saint Louis University’s College for Public Health & Social

Justice and a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) New Connections grantee. Keith Elder, PhD, MPH, is chair of the Department of Health Management and Policy at Saint Louis University’s School of Public Health, and an RWJF New Connections alumnus.

*Data from the “What Shapes Health” survey conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, NPR, and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. For more information, visit the Foundation’s website.

Offer immunity to keep used syringes and needles from children



Catlin Snyder
Guest Columnist

If you were holding onto something that could get you arrested, wouldn’t you want to get rid of it as quickly as possible?

That’s how used drug syringes and needles end up in parks and playgrounds.

Under North Carolina law, a person who tosses a used syringe near a public park would face the same penalty as someone who secured the syringe in a puncture-proof container where it could not cause harm.

Safe and legal syringe disposal options exist at hospital and pharmacy col-

lection sites. But injection drug users are not likely to take illegal sharps to a collection site if it means risking jail time. So instead, needles get tossed in public places — in streets, parking decks, and playgrounds.

It doesn’t take much for a needle to end up in the wrong hands. Curious little children will play with whatever’s on the ground.

But we can prevent this from happening. There are ways to get rid of needles that keep them out of our public spaces and out of children’s hands.

Needles can be safely thrown away inside hard-wall plastic containers like laundry detergent bottles that are too thick for a needle to puncture. Many injection drug users already use these containers to keep their loved ones safe.

But others ditch needles in unsafe ways because

they are afraid of how quickly police officers would zero-in on containers during a drug search and the arrest that would follow.

Would you rather a syringe sit tight inside a plastic bottle in an injection drug user’s home, or end up in a park where you neighborhood children play? For most people, the choice is clear: Protect the children. Seal the syringe in the bottle.

It’s a clear choice because neither option changes that drugs have already been injected — only whether or not children will come in contact with the used syringes. And it’s an especially clear choice because hard-wall containers are cheap, easy to use, and available in nearly every supermarket and convenience store.

Wherever people are



using drugs, there are hard-wall containers for sale. Injection drug users just need a reason to make the purchase.

So why aren’t we giving them that reason?

Guaranteeing legal immunity for syringes found in hard-wall containers is that reason. When drugs users know that they won’t be charged with possession of drugs or drug paraphernalia for items found inside a glaringly obvious neon-colored detergent bottle, they’re

much more likely to use it for safe syringe disposal. And that means fewer syringes on our streets and sidewalks.

Legalizing hard-wall containers does not encourage people to use drugs. It doesn’t make it any easier to use drugs. Legalizing hard-wall containers simply encourages safe disposal of syringes that are already being used, anyway.

Hard-wall containers are a community tool for a healthier tomorrow.

Keeping dangerous sharp objects away from children has an easy solution: get needles out of our parks and playgrounds. It starts with encouraging drug users to safely dispose of needles. North Carolina needs to grant legal immunity for needles seized in hard-wall containers — because it is never too soon to make child safety our number one priority.

Catlin Snyder is from Carrboro, N.C.