

Norris breaks boundaries while serving in native city

BY CHANEL DAVIS
THE CHRONICLE

Patricia Norris was born to serve. Since she was younger, she knew she would serve her community. What she didn't know was that she would have so much fun doing it.

"I really enjoy what I do. I have an opportunity to work with some brilliant minds, see them develop and know that they're going to contribute to society in a positive way," the alumna said as she sat in her office gazing out the window at Winston-Salem State University's campus. "That really is a good feeling, and it makes me happy to come to work knowing that these young kids will do well."

Norris, a Winston-Salem native, graduated from R.J. Reynolds High School and earned her undergraduate degree from Winston-Salem State University.

She is also a graduate of N.C. State University's Administrative Officer's Management Program.

She became the chief of police for the City of Winston-Salem in 2004 and remained in office until 2008, serving the city for 31 years. She became the city's first African-American chief and African-American female chief.

In 2008, Norris joined Winston-Salem State University as chief of police and director of public safety. She has served on several state and local boards.

After more than 35 years of law enforcement and public safety it's surprising to know that this was not the initial dream Norris had for herself.

Committed to serve

As a young teenager, Norris initially wanted to be a nurse. "Somewhere along the way, that changed," she said. "I had to go to the hospital and that's when I decided maybe that's not what I want to do because you have to put needles in people's arms, etc."

Norris said that she realized that she wanted to give back to the community and that she could help people without being a nurse.

The college student began working with the city of Winston-Salem in the Traffic Engineering Department as a summer employee.

"I started in a summer program with traffic engineering. We would go out and count the number of cars," she said. "It was supposed to be a summer job but once I got my foot in the door there, I was approached, asked if there was any other place in the city that I might want to work, and I said yes. I wanna be a police officer."

She said that at the time everyone thought she was just a little kid and people didn't think the 21-year-old female could do the job, especially during the time that women were becoming more involved in law enforcement.

"There were four or five other women, and if we could help each other we did. I formed a tighter bond with the guys that were on my squad," she said.

She said at first the guys thought they had to protect her until they realized she could hold her own. At that point, that bond became closer because they knew she had their backs as well.

"We were really like a close-knit family," Norris said. The 30-plus-year veteran said that she can remember the first time she questioned if this was the career path for her. She said she was riding with her first training coach, Tony Bowen, and they received a Code One call.

"I had never gone that fast in a car. We get to the neighborhood I grew up in and it wasn't too far from where I lived at the time. It was someone that I knew and he had been cut from his ear and all the way around his throat. The person who cut him was still in the house," Norris said.

She was given towels and told to stay with the victim and apply pressure to the wound so he wouldn't bleed out. While doing that she said that a man she went to school with came up and asked what was going on. He asked to see the cut and she told him no because she was applying pressure. She said he told her to let him see the cut again before he grabbed her by her shirt and flung her off the porch like a rag doll.

"I had to jump so I wouldn't fall. I remember thinking that that this was not supposed to happen like this. I got up, don't say one word to him, went in the house and I found my sergeant, Ben Johnson, and pulled on his sleeve like a little kid and told him that man pushed me off the porch," she said laughing.

"I learned a very valuable lesson that day. It did not make me want to quit but to dig my heels in more to learn more about what I should do and how I should do it. I never had another episode like that again. Regardless as to whether I know you or not, there is a fine line. You can't cross that line when there is a job to do."

From there Norris' career took off. She worked her way up the ranks with promotion after promotion.

Norris called the process highly competitive and serious. She would go on to become a lieutenant, a captain and end up as the assistant chief in the late '90s.

She would become the assistant chief and work over the patrol division, where she would be exposed to a wide range of situations. She said that it prepared her for what was next to come: applying for the chief of police position.

When she was told that the chief position was hers, she said she was quite humbled.

"They told me I couldn't tell anyone anything for the next two hours," she said. "I wanted to tell my husband so bad. It was an opportunity of a lifetime. The right factors played together at that time. I was so thankful I had an opportunity to be appointed."

She was sworn in as the city's 12th Chief of Police in 2004.

Her-story and history maker

Being first is not a limited concept to Norris.

Along with being the city's first African-American chief and African-American female chief, she became the first female and the first African-American to serve as president of the North Carolina Association of Chiefs of Police, an organization dedicated to the support and encouragement for police chiefs in the state, in 2001.

One thing that constantly bothered Norris was people contributing her success to her race or gender.

"Whenever I did get promotions, folks would say that it was because I'm black and that I'm a female," she said. "I would like to think that I learned something along the way and that my intelligence helped me get there too."

Her appointment also ushered in the city's first African-American male police chief in Barry Rountree, a man that Norris calls "very talented." He was appointed to the assistant police chief position during Norris' tenure.

"I saw the talent in Chief Rountree and I just wanted to make sure that the talent had an opportunity to blossom," she said. "He's smart, willing and ready to do the right thing and he's also a humble servant."

Rountree said that he holds a lot of respect for the person he worked with for several years. "I always thought she was a professional person. She was a long-term

employee with the city and she worked her way up through the ranks to make history in Winston-Salem to be the first African-American police chief in the city," he said. "She was a well-rounded police officer. In my opinion, she was a good leader, too. During that time she was able to implement some changes in the police department that we are still using today."



Norris

Retirement, or not

Norris said she put in a lot of work at the department before she decided to retire, including providing software for identification in lineups, securing a building for an evidence and training facility, dash cameras in the cars and maintained accreditation.

One thing that weighed heavily on her decision was the death of Sergeant Howard Plouff. The 17-year veteran was shot and killed while responding to a call for help from off-duty sheriff's deputies after a fight broke out inside Winston-Salem's Red Rooster Nightclub on Feb. 23, 2007.

"It still bothers me," she said with tears in her eyes. "It was time to go."

When she made the announcement that she would be retiring, she received a call from WSSU Chancellor Donald Reaves. "He asked me out to lunch," she said. Reaves would go on to tell her during lunch that his police chief was about to retire and he needed someone to help move the department forward. "He said 'you're an alumnae of the university, and it's time for you to give back'."

she said. "He made a very compelling argument. I left the city in June, was out the month of July and started here in August."

What does Norris think about that decision now?

"The best decision I've ever made," she said nodding her head for emphasis. "It's great to come to work. You meet the freshmen and they're all green. They don't know what to do, who to be with or what to say. By the time they get ready to graduate, they're so mature, they really do know their place and how their going to get there. It is a great feeling to work and see that kind of product produced."

Dr. Trey Cotton, WSSU vice chancellor for student affairs, called Norris an outstanding example to young women everywhere to follow their dreams.

"Not only was she the first African-American female chief for the city, but also for WSSU. Her accomplishments are too many to count, but what I find most noteworthy about Chief is the fact that she is the sweetest, kindest and most genuine person that you can meet; unless of course you are on the wrong side of the law," he said.

Looking back

"I've had a very full life. I've had exposure to some things that other people dream of having. I would like to say my dealings with people over the years has been good, for the most part. Everyone is not going to be my friend or be happy with the decision that I've made, but for the most part, my treatment in people has been consistent," she said. "My goal has always been to do the right thing."

She said that she couldn't have done anything without the support of her family, husband, children and her commitment to God.

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