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Enough is enough! Judge alarmed at surge in violent juvenile crime

BY TIMOTHY RAMSEY
THE CHRONICLE

People continue to speak out about the rise in violence throughout the city of Winston-Salem. No one seems to know why there is this sudden rise, or a concrete way to fix it, but what is for certain is the community wants a plan in place to combat the threat, especially one that impacts the youth.

Forsyth County Judge Denise Hartsfield is one of those community residents who has not been pleased by what she has seen on television, but even more disappointed by what she has seen in her courtroom. According to Hartsfield, a juvenile court judge, the number of violent juvenile cases has skyrocketed this year as compared to previous years and she is eager for a change in the path the city is heading toward.

"I wanted to sit down and just express my feelings as it related particularly to youth violence, because the upsurge in cases we have seen is totally amazing," said Hartsfield. "If I just looked at today, my juvenile docket today had 13 cases on it and 11 of them were violent offenses."

Hartsfield says there has been a noticeable rise in violent offenses in the juvenile court since March. She says there have been almost as many youth firearm-related complaints so far this year as there were the previous two years combined.

"The increase is just amazing," she said. "We have 48 cases now, compared to 25 for the previous year, and this is just August. So, if we keep averaging those numbers, we will easily be around 80 or 90 by the end of the year and that's totally ridiculous."

"I really attribute it to a cultural change, a serious



Judge Denise Hartsfield is fed up with the amount of juvenile violence in the city.

Photo by Timothy Ramsey

culture change," she said about what was contributing to the rise in violence. "I would like to think at some point that it may be because school went virtual in March and kids had a lot more freedom to do things. I could put it on COVID, but I really don't know, and that's why I wanted to speak out. I want to find out what's causing this cultural change in our community. We are beginning to look like Chicago, we are beginning to look like Richmond, California in the 80s, we are beginning to look like communities that have had this problem for some time now."

One of the biggest issues Hartsfield has is how certain individuals blame others for the youth violence problems in the city. She feels too many people are passing the buck when it comes to addressing the solutions.

"Everybody thinks that it's everybody else's

problem," she continued. "They think it's the church's problem, they think it's the school's problem, they think it's the court's problem, they think it's the parent's problem. Everybody can pass the buck to everybody, but the reality of this is by the time I meet these kids, the damage has already been done, so my options are very little."

"There is really nothing I can do when you get to this point except to try and create some sort of reality that says you are here and you have these charges, what's next?"

Hartsfield says she is aware of the fear that some in the community have about retribution from violent offenders if they tell authorities what they see. She says we have to overcome that fear and stand up for what is right.

"The only way to get to the root of this problem, as far as I'm concerned, is that we as a community

have to stand up and start reporting what we saw and trying to make this group and culture understand that this is not acceptable behavior for our city," said Hartsfield. "You are not going to tear up our city, you are not going to kill up our city or shoot up each other because we are not going to have it."

"We are going to start reporting people we see with guns; we are going to start reporting activity that is outside of our homes that is not right. We have to start identifying people. Yeah, I know it's scary, but at the end of the day, that is what is going to have to happen, because by the time it gets here, it's too late."

Hartsfield says she received her biggest wake-up call when she watched a YouTube video at a hearing. In the video, she watched how a young man waved an AK-47 around while in the drive-thru of a fast food restaurant and the

young lady at the window was not phased. Hartsfield says she was shocked at how calm, relaxed and desensitized the youth were around such a dangerous weapon.

Hartsfield said the video really scared her about how some of the youth think brandishing a weapon of that sort is a normal way of life. She says she does not have all the answers, but is actively looking to collaborate with like-minded individuals to find one.

"I don't have the answers, but I want my voice out there to say that I am seeking it," she said. "I want to know I am looking for all good people who are willing to come forward and help with this issue. I am looking for all good people who are willing and bold enough and love this community enough to be able to report things when we see it."

"We have to affirmatively do that or we are

going to lose a whole generation of people, not to war, not to COVID, not to crack, but to gun violence."

Following the deaths of several unarmed Black men and women earlier this year, Hartsfield says she was engaged in a conversation with someone who told her that they didn't know why everyone was screaming Black Lives Matter when we are killing each other. She said she became upset initially, but once she thought about the question in depth, her opinion changed.

"We need to be affirmative that these police killings are senseless, but we need to be equally as affirmative to the fact that us killing each other is equally as offensive, maybe more offensive," she went on to say.

As the only African American juvenile judge and a Winston-Salem native, Hartsfield said she is troubled and feels a different sense of responsibility toward the city.

"I feel a special hurt, I feel a special sense of helplessness to some degree, because it is very troubling that week after week these types of offenses continue to come and the majority look like me," she said. "We have to do more than chant 'stop the violence'."

In her 18 years as a judge in the county, Hartsfield says this is the worst year for juvenile violent crimes she has witnessed. She says there have been small rises in crime throughout her career, but never with this much consistency.

"My hope is built on the fact that we can do better as a community and we need to start now, because we are already about 20 dead children too late," she said somberly.

FCSO makes policy changes, prone restraint continues that led to death of John Neville

BY TEVIN STINSON
THE CHRONICLE

Since the death of John Neville, the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office (FCSO) has made several policy changes, but the prone restraint that led to Neville's death has not been banned.

According to Major Robert Slater, FCSO

detention bureau commander, there have been several changes to the department's Use of Force policy since Neville died from asphyxia after he was restrained by five officers while using the prone restraint and basically left hogtied, lying face down on a mattress.

Around 3:24 a.m. on

Dec. 2, 2019, Neville suffered a seizure while he was asleep and fell from the top bunk in his cell onto the concrete floor. After seeing him lying on the floor shaking as if he was having a seizure, Neville's cellmate pushed a panic button and shortly after that, detention officers and the on-call nurse arrived.

They found Neville "disoriented and confused" and decided to move Neville into an observation cell so the on-duty nurse could determine what was wrong.

While he was in the observation cell, officers used a prone restraint to try to get Neville to calm down. As he was being

restrained by officers, Neville told officers "Help me" and "I can't breathe" more than 50 times. In response, officers tell Neville to relax. At one point, one officer can be heard saying, "If you can talk, you can breathe," and at another point, "You can

See Neville on A8

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