

## ***Stepping Into the Shoes of a Police Officer***

By: Angela V. Willis

As a black female growing up in the Metro Detroit area, I've never really had a great deal of admiration or even respect for police officers. I've always viewed them through very dark and untrusting lenses. I know that is a disheartening statement for me to make. However, you would first need to understand my personal perspective and honestly, my stories could literally fill a book.

You see, I've seen some really ugly instances of police brutality, abuse or even misuse of police authority. I've driven by young Black or Latino men pulled over to the side of the road, forced to lay face-down on the ground with their hands awkwardly cuffed behind their backs as the officer ruffles through the vehicle looking for any reason to arrest them. I've watched members of the Drug Task Force and regular police officers too, steal money right out of the pockets of black men that they stop for no obvious reason other than being suspected of selling dope. I've witnessed police officers in plain clothes with their badges hanging from their necks drive through a crowd of people and brandish weapons the likes of which I've never seen to disperse peaceful groups leaving a night club or bar and these same officers appeared to be looking for any reason to "shoot a nigga."

There are countless stories that I could tell about how the police treat "suspects" but you could simply watch television and see a black man asphyxiated to death by New York Police Officers and unfortunately it seems that on just about any given day, you can find a black person shot to death by a police officer. But today, I had a totally different encounter with a police officer.

Today, while attending an ALPACT (Advocates and Leaders for Police and Community Trust of Southwest Michigan) meeting, I was placed in the shoes of an actual police officer tasked with approaching a vehicle that had been sitting for more than two hours on a quiet cul-de-sac. Prior to beginning the simulation, Officer Spoon gave me a quick tutorial on aiming my gun and then armed me with a non-lethal training ammunition airsoft pistol. He explained that I needed to approach the vehicle and see what was going on and, with that he turned the lights down in the specially adapted room and began the simulation. Suddenly a dark truck appeared on the screen and from the distance I heard Officer Spoon's voice say you can begin now...

An uneasy feeling suddenly came upon me, I wanted to stand in place and shout out my commands but I knew I had to get closer to the vehicle to see what was going on. I didn't know if someone was in the vehicle or if it was empty, I didn't know if the windows were rolled up or if they were down. I was a little afraid of what I would find, for all I knew, a dead person could

have been inside of the vehicle. I carefully approached the vehicle taking care to try and watch for any slight movement, I kept my gun in my hand but at my side facing the ground with my finger slightly off the trigger. As I got closer to the vehicle I saw a human figure sitting in the driver's seat. It was a woman with a baseball cap and she appeared to be hurt.

Immediately I began to shout "are you ok? Please step out of the vehicle!" But she didn't respond and I got really scared. I yelled it again as I walked just a little closer. I looked at the woman's chest and saw that she was breathing so I knew she was alive but she still hadn't moved. I yelled "step out of the vehicle" again and then the woman moved, she jerked her head around in my direction and that's when I saw a gun sitting on her thigh.

Every hair on my head and body stood up and I could feel adrenaline begin to blast through my body. I yelled "put your hands up!" The woman looked at me and I raised my gun and aimed as I shouted "put your hands up!" The woman's eye's met mine and she grabbed for the gun and I was left with no choice but to fire my gun. It was either going to be her or me and at that moment, I chose me. I fired my gun in rapid succession until the gun fell from the victim's hands and her body slumped over the wheel of the vehicle. I stood still in a moment of shock because I had just killed a woman. It all seemed so very intense and real.

The lights in the simulation lab came on shocking me back into what should have been a joyful reality because the simulation was over. I hadn't really killed anyone in real life but it didn't end that way. I was a nervous wreck, I wanted to cry out, but I controlled myself. I had been shaken to my core in a matter of seconds. Every limb on my body quivered with fear and trepidation. My head and eye's filled with uncertainty because I literally could not tell you what had just occurred outside of me taking the precious life of another, everything had just turned into a blur.

When I finally came to myself I was in such a hurry to give the airsoft pistol back to Officer Spoon, that honestly, I wanted to run away from the room and I did turn to immediately leave the simulation room, but the crowd of observers helped me to process the fact that it was ok and that I wasn't in trouble. After I gathered myself, Officer Spoon began to talk very softly to me, asking me what color the vehicle was. At that moment I could not remember if it was black or blue. He asked me if I had asked the suspect to get out of the vehicle and, I couldn't remember. He asked me if I instructed the suspect to put their hands up. I said "yes I did" but really, honestly, I didn't know if I had. Literally, everything was a blur, like the entire incident had just been thrown into a blender and turned on to high-speed-mix.

Officer Spoon explained that the simulation I had just completed was the type of example that they look for when they allow lay person's like me to participate in the process. Police Officers want the public to understand that making a split-second decision to draw your gun and to fire on someone is NOT an easy thing to do. It may look easy on T.V. but it is an exhausting, haunting and overwhelming experience. I was left to cope with the idea that I had just taken the life of another human being. I may have left a child without a mother or a mother and father without a daughter or a husband without a wife. The gravity of the situation had literally

given me a serious head-ache and, the situation wasn't even real. I couldn't imagine an officer having to face a situation in real life like this without a support system.

Much to my surprise, Officer Spoon did a magical thing for me. He reached out and gave me a hug. I had never, ever had a positive experience with a police officer before in my life. It took me stepping into the shoes of an officer to learn first-hand that the job they do that I usually frown upon them for doing, is not as easy as it may seem. More importantly, his act of compassion towards me showed me the level of compassion I should try and have for an officer forced to make the same decision.

It took me at least two hours to finally calm down from that heightened feeling of bewilderment. Honestly, if I hadn't taken that time, I would not have been able to write this story accurately. And if I were a betting person, I would bet against myself remembering every detail of the situation. My mind literally needed time to settle down before it could really remember most of everything that happened.

Don't get it twisted; I didn't magically fall in love with all police officers after the simulation and Officer Spoon's hug. My jury is still out on police officers and will probably remain so because of my personal experiences. But what the simulation did do for me was to give me pause, to at least try and better imagine how an officer may feel both before and after he or she has made the awful choice of pulling their gun and firing upon another living individual.