The Criminal Justice Conversations Podcast with David Onek

Episode #30: Susan Manheimer, San Mateo Police Chief and California Police Chiefs Association President(June 22, 2010)

Listen at www.law.berkeley.edu/cjconversations

DAVID ONEK: Welcome to the Criminal Justice Conversations podcast, a co-production of the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice and the Berkeley School of Journalism. I'm your host David Onek.

The podcast recorded weekly in the Berkeley School of Journalism studios features in-depth interviews with a wide range of criminal justice leaders, law enforcement officials, policy makers, advocates, service providers, academics, and others.

The podcast gets behind the sound bites that far too often dominate the public dialogue about criminal justice to have detailed nuanced conversations about criminal justice policy.

Today's guest is San Mateo Police Chief Susan Manheimer. Manheimer is also President of the California Police Chiefs Association. She became San Mateo's chief in 2000 after 16 years in the San Francisco police department. Manheimer was among the first group of women ever to earn the rank of lieutenant in the

San Francisco police department, among the first group of women ever to become a captain there, the first ever to become the police chief in San Mateo, and the first woman ever to become the president of the California Police Chiefs Association.

Manheimer received her bachelor of arts degree in business management from St. Mary's College and a master's degree in educational leadership from San Diego State University. She is on the board of Fight Crime/Invest in Kids California, the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center, and the University of San Francisco's Law Enforcement Leadership Institute. And she joins us in studio this morning. Susan Manheimer, welcome to the program.

SUSAN MANHEIMER: Thank you. Good morning, David.

ONEK: Let's go back to the early 1980s. You had worked as a radio reporter and had a young child. Why did you decide to go into policing at that point in your life?

MANHEIMER: I think I had early on aspirations of being a police officer back when there really were no women wearing the uniform, especially in New York, where I grew up. My dad was a

city councilman there. He was very up on police issues. I really grew up with a lot of the brass from the NYPD in our very living room. I looked up to them. They were heroes. I think early on I thought I wanted to be a hero, too.

So I moved on with life. I majored in law enforcement at the University of Maryland with my first couple of years. And then I came out here and got interested in broadcasting and other things. Had a family. Settled down with my husband. And then one day we were walking. We lived in San Francisco. Walking to the store, the local Cala, down at Haight and Stanyan, and as I was returning to my apartment building I got robbed. And that really changed my life. They held a knife to my daughter's neck and from thereon in, I really --

ONEK: Your daughter was how old at the time?

MANHEIMER: My daughter was two years old. And you know those little Playskool shopping carts, the toy ones? She had some little groceries she was pushing in her little toy shopping cart. I had my hands full of grocery. And really I think now I reflect back. It had a lot of wonderful opportunity for me to understand what it's like to be a victim of a traumatic

incident.

As I got into the lobby of the apartment building, he pulled out a knife out. Came from behind a stairwell, pulled a knife on my daughter, a very unique and distinctive knife that later helped us to identify who he was. And really held it up to her neck, asked me for all my money, and I think luckily I had to presence of mind to grab her, throw a couple of bucks at him, get away, and I called the police immediately.

Within minutes about 20 squad cars from the SFPD pulled up to our apartment building. And it turns out, based on the description, that he was a very bad guy. He was wanted for a bunch of rapings and stabbings in that specific area. And so they were very interested in trying to catch him. I worked with the detectives for weeks after that, really, on trying to identify him. I'll never forget sitting down in the fourth floor of the Hall of Justice in the robbery squad room looking at just stacks and stacks, hundreds and hundreds, of pictures of just that year's robbery suspects.

And it profoundly changed me. I'd grown up in the city, never really been scared, and I remember thinking if there are people

like this out there, I want to do something to be able to protect of course my family, my community, and do something to change all this.

ONEK: It must have been so horrifying to have that happen to your daughter.

MANHEIMER: It really was. I mean I think a lot of us walk around in a bubble of safety and invincibility. And it was really that incident that helped me realize that there are a lot of victims out there. And there's something that we can do about that in a positive way. And people choose different ways to do it, but for me, really, it was my husband encouraging me. At that time the SFPD had a minority and women recruitment drive. So with the encouragement of the detectives and a lot of people how mentored me, decided to sign up for the SFPD.

ONEK: What percentage of the force were women at the time that you signed up?

MANHEIMER: Very few. I want to think it was probably about one to two percent at that time.

ONEK: And as I said in the intro, you've achieved many firsts as a woman from the first woman lieutenant and captain in that group in San Francisco to the first woman chief in San Mateo and most recently the first woman president of the California Police Chiefs Association. What challenges have you faced as a trail blazer in these positions?

MANHEIMER: You know what's so wonderful? The SFPD is so diverse. Even though I was a first, I wasn't alone. There were many, many women and a lot of diversity in that department. So while I may have been in the first group, I had trail blazers like Mindy Pingle and Heather Fong and others whose names you'll know because they rose high in the ranks as well. So I was really with a group and we really had a lot of mentoring and support.

Now when I came down, interestingly enough, to San Mateo County, where I was the first woman chief, they had very few women at that time even really above the rank of sergeant. So as women there sought me out, it was harder for me to help and give them advice because I don't think I had ever really thought of myself as different or something that was really a trail blazer. Because I really had had those women who had come before me who

really opened those doors and I'm indebted to them.

ONEK: What do you now do to encourage other women to follow in your footsteps?

MANHEIMER: When I first made chief, I was really don't talk to me about being a woman chief. I want to stand as a chief. I want to be a good chief. But I really wasn't comfortable talking about the woman thing, if you will. Since then I've come to realize that it is such a symbol and a hope for so many women.

I had one father come up to me and said, remember that card, your business card you gave my daughter when she was seven? She's 14 now. She still has it on her dresser and talks about being a chief some day. So I realized through the time that there was something that I had in this role that was too important to squander and that was part of being a role model, being an encouraging and supporting the women and really the men to be able to see that this is something that really has arrived and it a valuable part of the policing landscape.

ONEK: I've certainly seen from my work with former Chief Fong in San Francisco just how much young women in San Francisco look

up to and admire her and how she has really helped so many of them reach their goals.

ONEK: Right. I did have a woman FTO at one point, Rose Melendez, in the SFPD. And I think seeing that affirmation was really important to me. So I remind young people that you need to find mentors everywhere. It's not just women. But women should be up there and need to be up there to inspire others and bootstrap them up.

ONEK: You were at SFPD for 16 years. What were your main assignments there and what did you learn from them that helps you as chief today?

MANHEIMER: The first one that I really truly enjoyed was getting to be a robber decoy. As you remember, really one of my gifts --

ONEK: Does that mean that there was one before that you didn't enjoy?

MANHEIMER: I had no assignment in the entire police department in my entire 16 years that I didn't love. And in my 25 years,

frankly, there's not been one thing that I've done or one day that I've not had challenges and enjoyment and some satisfaction. It's an incredible career, but I think being a robbery decoy for me, getting robbed about 25 times, helped me to come full circle and to avoid the victimization so others didn't have to go through that and to be very, very satisfied with making some good cases on some robbery suspects.

So I really enjoyed staying operational. I felt as a woman it was important not to be niched into sort of the support role or the domestic violence or women and children criminal investigations. And really make my bones, if you will, as a rough and tumble cop and do the hard work to show and get the credibility with the department.

ONEK: Another example of that was leading the Tenderloin Task Force, which now has turned into an actual station in Tenderloin. Tell us about that a little bit.

MANHEIMER: Right. I started in the Tenderloin early in my undercover days. I've always recognized that the best policing, the toughest policing is in those areas that are so challenged like the Tenderloin and other areas of the city. And that's the

best police work.

So we started the Tenderloin Task Force with a hand picked group of folks who really truly wanted to make a difference there. The difference in the Tenderloin, as in other areas that are challenged, is that whole web and network of others who are so dedicated. The nonprofits, the service providers, the faith community. Working with them just made it truly an opportunity for change there. So some of the most satisfying work that I've done, the leadership I've been able to provide there and coming up on the streets working myself as an undercover and recognizing how the cops need to operate with the support of the community and everybody else. It's just been a very incredible time to make some changes.

One of the first things we did in the Tenderloin was the Halloween for kids, where we actually made deals with drug dealers to get off the streets for that night, to clear the way so that the children in the Tenderloin who, believe it or not, there's about 5,000 of them that live up in those single room occupancy hotels, so that they could have Halloween back for the kids. Those small changes I think helped to really infuse the community with the opportunity for hope.

ONEK: Now you just talked about the important of working with the community. And community policing and problem solving policing have really been hallmarks of your career, both in San Francisco and in San Mateo. How has the concept of community policing evolved over the course of your career?

MANHEIMER: It's wonderful. I remember sitting with Bill Bratton as I was a younger cop and he the chief I think at New York PD at the time, the commissioner there. And talking about the evolution of policing really kind of coming full circle. As I was growing up, the cops were on the beat. They didn't have the cars and the radios. They knew what was going on in their communities. And really in the '80s and '90s after we'd had the police cars which allowed us to drive very fast through neighborhoods and the radios, which at the time I remember Dianne Feinstein trying to get a three-minute response time to any 911 call. A truly laudable goal. People are in trouble. They call 911. It's a small city. We can respond. But what happened with the evolution is that police started driving very fast through neighborhoods to get to calls and in essence report on crimes that already occurred, i.e., making us report takers.

The wonderful thing about community policing as it evolved in the '80s and '90s was that we recognized we needed to take cops out of the cars, put them back walking the beat, out in the communities, hearing what the community's issues were, and really dealing with them first hand.

So how does that reconcile with what we're doing today? We have the web. We have virtual meetings. We have everyone really moving fast through their lives as we are moving fast through ours. We're in a downscale economy, so we're cutting resources. The challenge and the opportunity, I think, for police at this time is to leverage those resources, that web of services, so that we're not the only ones. You know, we can come as the first responders, but what happens after that? Hooking and booking them as we used to call policing is not really the response for so many of the societal dysfunction issues we deal with that are not crimes.

Homelessness is not a crime. Gangs are not necessarily a crime. There are a lot of juveniles who have had no other opportunities or hope, so in all of these what we try and do is be the leader as the community policing resource, but bring the rest of the solutions to the table and apply them strategically to

the problems. So our new really neighborhood based policing, community policing model, is very exciting because I think it allows us to look at long term solutions.

ONEK: Can you give some specific examples from your time in San Mateo of that approach?

MANHEIMER: We really started it in the Tenderloin, this sort of neighborhood safety partnership model. That was, as I held community meetings, it wasn't just the police standing up there telling everyone about the crime that was happening. It was allowing the community to tell us, the police, about the crime and the quality of life issues that were happening that were concerning them. And then having all of the different resources, and Mayor Willie Brown was a great one, to expect the city services to really align together.

So at that table were public works and park and rec department and mental health and health department and all of the different things that contributed and had to be part of the solution. Public works for lighting. Park and rec for cleaning up the parks. And then mental health for dealing with the substance abuse.

So as I moved to San Mateo, it was really wonderful to be in a county that worked so well together. We were able to build on that model of neighborhood safety partnerships and really put together something that recognized the basic community policing approach. And that is how do you solve long term crime? It's really three factors. The first is the suspect activity. Is it drug dealing? Is it robberies? What's the suspect activity in the area and how do you impact that? And then there's the victim activity. How do you change the behaviors, the awareness, or even the hope and the empowerment of the victims to give them the strength? And then what about the environment or landscape?

When you look at all three of those, if you can sincerely impact all three of those, you have an opportunity to long term change of crime reduction as well as quality of life improvement. So we applied this model. I can think of one great instance if you're interested.

ONEK: Absolutely.

MANHEIMER: We applied this model to an area that was a real passion of mine. In my early days at the SFPD, I was with the

gang task force. The only thing I knew about San Mateo County was we would surveil some of the gang members back to their houses after crimes occurred. I always seemed to end up at the 700 block of North Amphlett in San Mateo.

When I moved to San Mateo I was not surprised to see that there were times when there was a lot of crime in that area. Obviously a lot of the gang members lived there, but there were also, like the Tenderloin and other areas, a lot of families and others really struggling to get ahead and to improve their lives who were really victims of some of this predatory crime. And, in fact, their kids and others were being recruited.

So we took that model and sat down with the community and with the gang members and with all of the different services from the landlords to the public works to fix the lighting in the alley. And piece by piece, we peeled back the layers of that onion that had caused 25 years of really embedded gang activity and crime in this neighborhood. And by the end of the first year, we had what's the equivalent of really a neighborhood watch group going, but all in Spanish because they are mostly immigrant families who didn't have a command of the English language. We had built a lot of trust within the community that had really

not trusted.

ONEK: That's what I wanted to ask. How did you get people from both the community, but also city services and everyone, to trust enough to come to the table to work together on this issue?

MANHEIMER: Right. I think a lot of it is pure tenacity and drive. If you believe in it. The lucky thing is I had seen it happen before and I understand it.

ONEK: In the Tenderloin?

MANHEIMER: In the Tenderloin. In the Mission. And other places. And I think I knew that community work is dirty work. You have to roll up your sleeves. It's not always going to be pretty. You have to believe in the success of it and you have to recognize. It's almost similar to domestic violence. We know as cops the first three or four times that we go to calls of domestic violence or any cycle of violence, we're really doing intervention and we're not going to solve the problem until we build up enough trust to say, you know what? We're here. We're not going away. And here's what we can provide for you.

It's similar to addiction withdrawal. It's similar to a lot of different things.

I really believe in this community work that you have to have the drive to keep having everyone at the table and have some accountability. We had the city attorney there to let landlords know that did they not clean up that area, they'd be subject to nuisance abatement codes. We had the residents there to let them know if you don't really assist us with this, your kids are going to go down the path of the gang. So I think it's really providing the right levels and almost like a conductor. You're trying to keep everyone at the table.

But the day that I realized that we truly had made a change there was when I came to a community meeting and we also had some great community outreach workers that we really put there recognizing that we needed some facilitators to help with this.

One individual, Alejandro Vilchez, with Peninsula Conflict Resource Center, had both the past gang history. He had credibility within the community. And we put together this first really big community meeting. And I was pleased to see that he had all these translator headsets there and translators. I

said how wonderful, Alejandro, you're going to translate for everyone. He goes no, Chief. I'm going to translate for you. So myself and the mayor, the city attorney, city manager and others put the headsets on and we had to walk in an immigrant's shoes at that point, frankly, David. Because we were the ones who weren't privy to the conversation. We were the ones who were waiting for the translator to tell us what was going on. And it was a profound change.

At that moment the city assumed that they were working within the culture of the community, within the language of the community. And we were able to really not only see the struggles and challenges, but better walk a mile in their shoes, so to speak. I think it was then that the community started to really trust us, that we were there to stay.

ONEK: Wow, that must have been incredibly well-received, I would imagine, by the community.

MANHEIMER: It was and it really, to me, was one of those you hate to say paradigm shifts, but I think for the city of San Mateo it was an opportunity for the entire city to recognize that this is a part of our culture. This is a part of our

community and so we're going to embrace it and work through whatever obstacles, obstructions, or challenges we have. So just to finish out the story, within the next year we were able to continue to both support and develop community leaders within that community who then stood up to do the work of the outreach. But also a neighborhood watch group and got a lot of the gang members, actually through intervention, out of the gangs. We put in some real strict landlord codes of conduct, if you will, and so that next year we had an actual quinceaneras there in the alley and then now we've had national night out there every single year.

One of our officers had left and had come back two years later and I told them that we were having an event in the alley, they call it, el callejón. And it was a celebration. We had the library there with their book mobile. And the most amazing thing was he showed up in his SWAT attire with his helmet and baton thinking it was the alley of old and we were going to have to go in there and really provide the SWAT presence. He was just shocked when kids ran up. They started climbing all over him, asking him for his baseball card. So it really helped to highlight. Of course the crime stats are the bottom line story.

ONEK: I was about to ask about that. So tell about what difference it's made.

MANHEIMER: We had had six shootings, stabbings, machete violence. You name it. We had had two summers in 2005, 2006 that really caused us to take this next step a next level. Since then we went from over 140 calls in one summer in that alley to about four or five in this past couple of years.

ONEK: And you've been able to sustain that over time?

MANHEIMER: Absolutely. And the difference in sustaining it is that it's not being sustained by us. We have built up the support and the network and the infrastructure within the community to sustain it. So guess what? It's no longer a resource problem for us. It's no longer a drain for the city. And it's now an area that's really thriving. And in fact I know one of the landlords has thanked us profusely because his home values have gone up there. So it's a win-win all the way around. It's the right thing to do. But the proof is in the numbers to us and we haven't had gang violence of any significance there in the last four years after having 25 years of embedded gang violence there.

ONEK: I want to talk next about you making the jump from a captain in San Francisco to a chief in San Mateo. Now of course San Mateo is a much smaller department than San Francisco, but tell me about the adjustments you had to make from going to a captain to being the chief. To being the person in charge of the entire department.

MANHEIMER: It's a wonderful jump. A little bit scary. No one had really left the San Francisco police department, certainly not before retirement age, to take this kind of a jump out to be an at will chief in a smaller community, a community I wasn't real aware of. But what I found there is interestingly enough, I had been a captain at several district stations and the night captain of the whole city in San Francisco.

The city that I had was smaller than any one district that I had up in San Francisco.

ONEK: Right.

MANHEIMER: But having the whole enchilada, if you will, responsible for the entire city and the quality of life and the

position that a chief holds in a community to be able to both inspire confidence and leadership in public safety and quality of life in a community is, if recognized and handled right, a really humbling and great experience. Because I think people do look to the chief as the figurehead, if you will, of the organization to understand and relate to the varying and diverse communities. Just like San Francisco has a diversity that I love, so too does San Mateo have a diversity of the very well off areas that have their challenges and then alas there's a targeted property crimes and traffic and quality of life issues. And then the very challenged areas of the city with higher crime, gang activity.

So it really was on a smaller scale a replication of any one district station. But the amount of responsibility, I think, whether you're a chief of a very small city of 15 or 20 or the chief in LAPD, a lot of the similar, shared responsibilities and experiences are the same. From personnel issues to complicated labor and budget issues. It really has been quite a challenge and quite a lot of the education and fun.

ONEK: I want to talk next about a recent tragedy in San Mateo. San Mateo just had its first murder of the year. The victim was

David Lewis, who had dedicated his life to stopping the violence in East Palo Alto and surrounding communities. And there's been an outpouring of grief throughout the region. Obviously we don't want to ask you any questions about the case that might compromise the ongoing investigation, but can you talk about what impact Lewis's murder has had on the department and on the community?

MANHEIMER: It's been huge. You always, I think, know about a person's life if you didn't know them well based on the reaction to the loss in his death. He was a huge figure, nationally and internationally known, obviously. But chose to, even though he was able to turn his life around from the drug dealing and the other criminal activity that he freely admits and being in prison, to stay within the community and to improve and work on that for both re-entry, for parole he's coming back to the community, as well as drug addiction and substance abuse treatment. He stayed there and he rolled up his sleeves, stayed in the community, and worked tirelessly for years and years on incredible programs. So the amount of lives he's touched, both within the community of parolees and ex-cons, as well as the mental health community and others has been tremendous. So in looking now to try and solve this crime, we understand that

really the leads, the information, and hopefully the break in the case is going to come from the community. So we've turned to the community. We've gone out to the community and worked with them, particularly down in East Palo Alto. I'm very close with the chief, Ron Davis, down there who's very connected and actually was a partner with David Lewis on all of the re-entry work.

ONEK: On the re-entry work, yes.

MANHEIMER: On all of the re-entry work. Really groundbreaking re-entry work that's being recognized and replicated throughout the country.

ONEK: So how is that work going to continue when a central figure? I believe Chief Davis was able to pull down the only grant from the state to start this innovative re-entry program and I know that David Lewis was central in devising that program. How is that work going to continue after this loss?

MANHEIMER: Right. And I believe it will because I believe like any true leader or any great program, the true test is in sustainability and replication. I believe he's been able to do

both. It was seeded with money that was coming from both the fed and the state and I think locally. I know that there's a huge commitment to it. And just as in our neighborhood safety partnerships, I think once you form the foundation and you show the success and you build those partnerships within the public and private sector, I think that there's a lot of dedication. Probably a re-commitment by dedicated community members in his loss to make sure that it's his legacy and that it won't downplay it.

But while we have this opportunity, I want to make sure that everyone understands that we are going to be working within the community to leave no stone unturned and not to rest until we bring the killer or killers to justice in this case.

ONEK: You talked about your relationship with Ron Davis, the East Palo Alto chief. You also have other chiefs who you have relationships with who have recently come to the Bay Area. George Gascon in San Francisco. Tony Batts in Oakland. Ron Davis is a finalist for the Seattle position, so there are these very high profile chiefs who have recently come or have developed in the Bay Area now. Can you talk about the regional collaboration with your Bay Area partners?

MANHEIMER: Yes, absolutely, it's very, very exciting. Let's not forget Rob Davis in San Jose.

ONEK: Sure, there are many of them.

MANHEIMER: Really. There's many others. We just had Mike Meehan actually come here. In Berkeley from up in, I believe, it was Washington or Oregon.

ONEK: He was in Seattle, actually and came down from there.

MANHEIMER: In Seattle, so another gem and very dedicated and very bright. Very wonderful future. Committed and progressive. What we did not too long ago at the University of San Francisco Law Enforcement Leadership Institute was to bring these leaders from the Bay Area together and say you know, now more than ever with George Gascon and Tony Batts coming in, I think it's struck a new chord of inter-regional interoperability and regionalization. Because when we think about it, SFPD for many, many years was sort of a closed shop. They were very good at what they did, but there was not a lot of cross pollenization, if you will. There was not a lot of outside training. There was

not really a lot of inter-regional cooperation.

George, coming from outside, from areas where they did that, LA County had something like 40 cities in it, so he's very used to that regional cooperation. Tony Batts similarly. So I think it was a wonderful opportunity to really take those anchor cities with these young, talented, driven, and committed chiefs and all get together and say now what are we doing regionally? And how do we make sure that we have a web both of safety and also of law enforcement. The bad guys don't know where one jurisdiction stops and the other starts. It's got to be that seamless with all of our resources around the Bay Area. So we identified four or five key areas that really from interoperable technology to an analytical and data driven policing to the mobile field force concept. And then some re-entry and other programs. Prevention programs that we could all do together. And it's very exciting.

ONEK: Time for one last quick question. You're beginning a one year term as president of the chiefs association. What's the single biggest issue you see facing the association this year?

MANHEIMER: I hate to repeat what everyone already knows, but it's budget, budget, and more budget. For the state of

California with public safety, unfortunately there's some decisions around prisoner release that I think are probably driven a lot more by numbers than they are about good public policy or good public safety. We are really dedicated to make sure that that conversation continues to focus around good public safety decisions.

ONEK: OK. Susan Manheimer, thank you so much for joining us.

MANHEIMER: Thank you. It's great to be here.

ONEK: We have now completed 16 episodes of the Criminal Justice Conversations podcast. We are going to pause the podcast for the rest of the summer and start back up again with a new lineup of exciting guests in September. We are very interested in getting your feedback on our first 16 episodes. Please email at cjconversations at gmail dot com to let us know what you think. That's C-J-CONVERSATIONS all one word at gmail dot com.

Thank you for listening to the Criminal Justice Conversations podcast. You can find this episode of the podcast and all prior episodes on our website at www dot law dot Berkeley dot edu slash cjconversations. And on iTunes. You can also become a fan

of the Criminal Justice Conversations podcast on Facebook and you can follow the podcast on Twitter at cjconversations. The podcast is engineered by Milt Wallace. Our editor is Callie Shenafelt and our program intern is Sheridan Bloch. I'm David Onek. Thanks for listening.