

Diversity Dialogue Interview with Sgt. Angie Davis-Leveritte 3/3/2020

- John Caher: Welcome to *Amici*, News and Insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher. Today's program is a Diversity Dialogue interview with Sergeant Angie Davis-Leveritte.
- John Caher: Sergeant, thank you for joining us. Can you just please tell me about your career in the courts? Who, what, when, where, why? Where'd you start?
- Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Well, my career path in this court started differently than most court employees. I started with the Erie County Sheriff's Office as a Sheriff's Deputy in the jail. Then, later in my career, I transferred over to the court division. And then in 2007 the Unified Court System came in and took over the court security in the City of Buffalo, so I was a part of that transfer of functions and that's how my career started in law enforcement as a court officer.
- John Caher: I see. So, you just got transferred over from the Sheriff's Department to the courts basically?
- Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Correct. Yes.
- John Caher: All right. Let's back up a second. Where'd you grow up and who were your early role models?
- Sgt. Davis-Leveritte I grew up in Buffalo, New York. I grew up on the East Side of Buffalo and my parents were my role models.
- John Caher: Tell me about them.
- Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Well, my dad, he's a veteran and a retired auto worker. My mother, she is a homemaker, and I also grew up in a home with my grandmother. They just taught us the value of hard work. My dad was a no-nonsense guy. He taught his children to respect themselves and to respect others and that nothing was handed to you, you had to work hard for everything that you got. My mother taught me that I can do anything that I wanted to do with my life, not just what society expected of me.
- John Caher: Is there anything in your background that led you to consider or pursue a career in law enforcement?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Yes. I moved to my neighborhood when I was six years old. Our neighborhood was a nice neighborhood. It was homeowners and everybody cared about their home and they cared about their community. And as I got older, my community started to change. You couldn't walk down the street without passing some people on the corner, and as a young person to see your neighborhood change, it was kind of hard.

And I remember one day I was walking to a reading center. It was like a community center that the kids went to for homework help or just to hang out. And one day these two plain-clothes police officers just stopped me when I was walking to the center. And they started asking me questions like, "Where are you going? Do you do drugs?" And I was angry about that. As a young kid, I just couldn't believe that someone was asking me those questions.

And I remember when I got to the center, there was two women who helped us and gave us snacks. I told them my story and they were like, "Well, don't be angry. Do something about it."

That was a defining moment when I knew that I wanted to do something in law, but I didn't know what type of law I wanted to do. I just so happened to end up in law enforcement.

John Caher: And how did you end up at the Sheriff's Department?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Well, when I was younger, I took every civil service exam that I could think of, anywhere in New York State. Originally, I started with the Monroe County Sheriff's Department, and I had worked there for nine years. And then my mother got ill and so I looked into a job that was closer to home in Buffalo. And I got transferred to Buffalo, took a lateral transfer. And that's how I ended up at the Erie County Sheriff's Department, closer to home.

John Caher: As a relative rarity in law enforcement, a black female, did you experience any particular challenges from a gender or a racial perspective?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Yeah. I'm going to say yes, because I'd be less than truthful if I answered this question by saying that there aren't any challenges particular to your gender or your race.

I will say that a female officer is perceived as the weakest link. You're challenged more by the male officers, you're challenged more by the

prisoners and the public, and you're even challenged by your colleagues. And when you're a female officer who is black and a supervisor, that challenge level becomes different and more difficult. And when I was promoted to Sergeant in 2017, I'm going to tell you, I faced some of the biggest challenges of my career.

John Caher: Really. That recently, huh?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte That recently. I really don't want to get into particulars, but those challenges did not define me. So, I have to answer that question, yes.

John Caher: Do you get the support and respect and encouragement you need from the Unified Court System?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Oh, definitely. Definitely I do.

John Caher: So that's not where the problem is?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte No, that was not the problem. No, the Unified Court System itself as a whole gave me a lot of respect and encouragement as far as promotions and being more involved in things like diversity and inclusion and things like that. So yes, they did give me a lot of respect.

John Caher: Despite your difficulties, would you encourage someone else similar to you to apply?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Definitely, because your challenges don't define you. It makes you stronger, it makes you better. Actually, it makes you a trailblazer. People can learn from you or they learn from your journey-

John Caher: It sounds like that early lesson you mentioned, which was don't get angry, get ... What was it, the teacher told you?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Oh, do something about it.

John Caher: Do something about it. That seems to be exactly what you're saying.

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Yeah. Basically, yeah.

John Caher: Is there any professional mentor that you have that you'd like to identify?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte There were many people that were instrumental in how I got to where I am in my career. And I'm grateful to all of them. And I don't want to mention anyone in particular, because I don't want anybody to get

offended because I didn't mention them. But they know who they are. And I'm very appreciative of them for everything they did for me.

John Caher: Okay. What's your day like? What's a typical day in your life? You get up, you come in and then what? Or is there no typical day?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Normally I come into the office about 8:40. I get dressed, I put on my equipment. I try to get that cup of coffee in, I talk to the officers before they go to their post, and I check my emails and my voicemail. So those are the things that I do every day.

But as a court officer, your day isn't typical, it changes. Your day sometimes is determined by the people who utilize the courts. So, like today for instance, we took someone into custody on a bench warrant. We took care of an issue with a judge who was threatened. Every day, my "typical" day changes. So, what I do today may not be my typical day tomorrow.

John Caher: What is a great day on the job?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte A great day is when myself and my staff get to go home safe. Now that's a great day, a great day, that we go home unharmed, not injured, to be home with our families. That's a great day.

John Caher: I'm hoping that is more often than not.

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Yes, it is. I haven't lost anyone yet, so yes, I'm still here.

John Caher: How dangerous is your job?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte It can be very dangerous. You have people coming into the courthouse where someone else is determining their lives, meaning if they have custody of their children or if someone's suing them, taking all their money away, so it can be dangerous. You've got people who are being taken into custody who may not want to go to jail, who might bring weapons in and they're going to do anything that they could do to be free. So, when you back someone up against the wall, you don't know what their reaction is. There's not a script for a court officer when engaging in doing their job.

John Caher: I would imagine that with people coming to court, most people, when they come to court, it is likely the most traumatic, most stressful time of their life, whether it's civil or criminal, and they are not necessarily at their most rational.

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Correct, correct.

John Caher: And so is it your job to basically remain calm, calm them down and-

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Exactly. Because like you said, some people have never been in trouble in their life and they may just be walking into the courthouse just to go to Small Claims Court. And just walking into the courthouse, that's intimidating in itself. And then when you walk in, you see all these officers dressed in blues, telling you that you have to take your belt off, put your coat through the machine, something that they don't do every day. So, they feel a bit intimidated by that.

They may not like the direction that they're given when they first walk in the building. So, that tone when they first walk in, can set their whole view on the process for the rest of their visit in the courthouse.

John Caher: Do most days, though, start and end peacefully, where you're able to avoid or prevent things from getting out of hand?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Yes. And that start with communication. That starts from the first time someone walks in the door, that first interaction they have with someone. You may be having a bad day when you walk in. But when you deal with an officer who is respectful of you and is treating you nicely, and not even looking at whatever issue brought you into the courthouse, and says, "Good morning, have a good day," that's communication and interaction.

John Caher: Well, I know of many, and you know of many, many, many more, instances where a court officer has diffused a dangerous or potentially dangerous situation. What we don't know, neither of us, is how many bad situations never occurred just by your presence.

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte That's right. Not only is communication important, it's us being there. That command presence of an officer being there would diffuse a lot of situations.

John Caher: What are you most proud of in your career to date?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Well, I am most proud of when I was promoted to a New York State Court Officer Sergeant in 2017. And I'm proud of all the committees that I sit on, that I have a seat at the table, that what I think counts. And that's most important.

John Caher: What committees are we talking about?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte I am on the Gender-Racial Fairness Committee. I'm on the Eighth Judicial Diversity Committee. Just last year, in 2019, I was asked to join the DCAJ Diversity Task Force, and for me that was huge to be able to come together with people across the state from different backgrounds, different professional titles, and just sit down and just talk about the diversity in the courthouse. So that was huge for me, as a court officer, that was huge.

John Caher: Now, a couple of the committees you mentioned I think are local Eighth District Committees. The "DCJA" — that's the Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Task Force, and of course it's statewide. So, it seems like there's a concerted effort within the court system to be sensitive to diversity issues.

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Yes, there is. It's on the forefront and people are talking about it. So yes, I would agree with that.

John Caher: So, when you're not working, what do you do for fun?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte I spend time with my family. My family is important. I spend time with friends. My children, even though they're grown, I just love being involved in their lives. I like to go to the movies. I like to clip coupons and just relax.

John Caher: That sounds very good. Now I don't know when it was that you would have taken your first exam to become a court officer, but of course we're administering one between April 15th and June 10th of this year.

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Correct.

John Caher: What do you wish you'd known and before you got into all this?

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte How impactful it would be. It's a great job, it's a great career. And actually, really, there's nothing different that I would have done from the time of when I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, until I became a court officer. For me, it was perfect, and there wouldn't be anything that I would change.

John Caher: Terrific. Sergeant, thank you so much for your time.

Sgt. Davis-Leveritte Oh, thank you so much. Thank you.

John Caher:

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