

Promoting Diversity in the Court System: Lieutenant Vincent Sinclair, 8/1/21

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insights from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher. I'd like to welcome you to this Diversity Dialogue edition of the program.

Today we're joined by Lieutenant Vincent Sinclair, a court officer who, since 2009, has trained aspiring court officers at the Court Officer Academy. In addition to his regular duties, Lieutenant Sinclair is a statewide coordinator for the Court Officer's Ceremonial Unit. And in his free time, he spends on a lot of time helping his community. Largely through a program he founded called, LEO Hearted Cares, and I'll let him explain what that's all about. He's also been a longtime Big Brothers, Big Sisters volunteer. And Chief Judge Janet DiFiore recently commended Lieutenant Sinclair for his role in designing a new Community Affairs program between the court system and the police. Lieutenant, welcome to the program. When, why and how did you become a court officer?

Lieutenant Sinclair: When, why and how. When I became a court officer, it was January of 2006. I got accepted into the Academy. That was on the heels of getting through the physical agility, the medical, the psychological background investigation and everything else. The "why" and "how" was literally through my parents. They were both City workers. Both of them retired from the City Department of Corrections. My mom was an officer and my father was captain, and they made me take pretty much all civil service exams. This was the agency that they really truly wanted me to be part of, and I followed my parents' advice.

John Caher: Why is that? Why did they stress this agency?

Lieutenant Sinclair: Well, with parents working in the City Department of Corrections, it was a pretty rough time in the City Corrections at that period. And they just didn't want that for me, so they encouraged me to take this job. I did get offered NYPD, but parents being parents, they wanted their child to be safe, and this was the option that they saw as best.

John Caher: I see. Now you mentioned the physical testing, the psychological testing. How difficult is it to get *into* the academy? And take it one step further. How difficult is it to get *through* the academy?

Lieutenant Sinclair: To get into the academy? Well, if you really think about it, from the time you take the exam, there may be, let's say 100,000 people throughout the state that take the exam. So, to make it to the actual academy, if we were to do the probability, the chances are very slim. So, getting through,

first scoring well on the written exam, then passing your physical agility and your medical, psychological, the background, everything else, it is a process. It does take a long period of time, a lot of man power and hours are put into vetting each possible candidate. So, it is a process which is pretty involved and extensive to get into the academy.

Lieutenant Sinclair: Getting through the academy: I'll say a lot of it is preparation, both physically, mentally, and also socially. People need to prepare for the physical attributes, as far as push-ups, sit-ups, the run time and everything else. But you also need to get your families ready. The Academy's pretty demanding, especially if there's family involved— kids, spouses, things of that sort. It can be taxing if there isn't a conversation beforehand. And I think that adds a level of stress that people aren't prepared for. And getting through, I think, the preparation is really where it's at. It is physically demanding, it is mentally demanding, but it's not impossible, obviously. Over 4,000 officers wear the uniform. It is a hurdle and a challenge for many, but it is possible with the proper preparation.

John Caher: It sounds like it's very possible with the right preparation. Now, so you got out of the Academy, and then what? What were your first assignments?

Lieutenant Sinclair: Straight out the academy, I started in New York Criminal Night Court, and that was an interesting time. I was very young when I graduated, and just the idea of night court wasn't something that you heard about, heard people talk about it, and the Academy had mentioned it, but you didn't really have a full grasp on what night court was. In all actuality, it was a great time. The crew that I worked with were amazing. They took me under their wing. The supervision there was helpful, in the sense of just guiding me along and teaching me arraignments. That's all you really do in night court, is just arraignments. But there were so many facets that I was able to pick up on and learn, just due to the years of experience that I walked into, working with the crew that I had there.

The least senior person probably had about eight, nine years on, by the time I walked in. So, walking in straight up from the Academy, they were more than willing to teach me all that they knew. That was a blessing. Shortly after getting into night court though, I put a transfer in for days. About a year later, I get a transfer out to Queens Criminal Court, where I transferred back to days, and I was out there for about two to three years. And that's when I also had the opportunity to apply for and join the New York State Court Ceremonial Unit, as well as apply for the Special Response Team, both of which I was able to successfully complete and join.

John Caher: Tell me about the ceremonial unit. What is that and what's your role in it?

Lieutenant Sinclair: So, the New York State Court Ceremonial Unit is a unit that comes out of the Department of Public Safety, and our responsibilities are to render honors and be present for very big events, as well as small. We're at graduations and retirement walkouts, anywhere where there's going to be a gathering of people, and we want to put our best foot forward. We also do funeral services, and presenting the flag to the next of kin, and casket duty, and rifle teams and color guards and all that kind of stuff. So, we are a mixed bag. Anytime that there is an event where they do want some type of representation from the uniform force, the ceremonial unit will be requested and get deployed out to those events.

John Caher: Now, you also mentioned a response unit. Is that what you said?

Lieutenant Sinclair: Yes. Special Response Team.

John Caher: What is that?

Lieutenant Sinclair: So, Special Response Team, or as it is commonly called "SRT," is there for the operational needs of the courts. Generally, if there are any type of situations or events that are taking place where they would need some operational support from the uniform forces, they would be deployed to those things. So, if you think about high profile cases where you're going to have an influx of volume of people present, and you want a uniform for there, the SRT could be present for that. They also do things behind the scenes like judicial protection. So, if there are judicial threats that are deemed credible, they can possibly get deployed out to escort judges around.

Within the courts they also do things like "cell extractions." If there's a defendant that doesn't want to come out, and a judge deems it necessary, they can sign a force order and have the Special Response Team answer to the cell and utilize the minimum amount of force necessary to get this individual out and present in front of the court. So, they again are a mixed bag of different operational needs for the courts. Not to say that any uniformed officer isn't able to conduct these things, but the Special Response Team is just trained to do them in a safer and more proper manner, if you will.

John Caher: Now, let's back up a moment. What is your ethnic heritage?

Lieutenant Sinclair: Both my parents are Jamaican. My grandfather on my father's side came here when he was in his teens— pretty much the classic migration story. Came here with \$7 in his pocket, established himself on a job and was able to make a home. He settled down in Camden, New Jersey, and then we eventually moved to New York. On my mother's side, my great grandparents came here from Jamaica, so that was a totally different experience. I remember talking to my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, about her experience growing up in Spanish Harlem during the Great Depression. So, that was an experience different from my father's side, who, again, migrated here from Jamaica, but came a different route.

John Caher: Sure. Different route, different times. Now, who are your early role models?

Lieutenant Sinclair: I was blessed to have a number of role models, all of which surrounded my parents and their circle. My father, in addition to being a captain with the Department of Corrections, also owned and ran a martial arts school. So, I grew up around men that were of high caliber, whether it be martial arts, whether it be law enforcement, or military. My father was also an Army veteran. Just growing up around men of that caliber was a very influential part of who and why I am where I am right now. If my father didn't have words for me, definitely one of these "uncles," as I call them, would pull me aside and talk to me as well. Growing up, having that diversity of thought, and diversity of male figures in my life, definitely helped with making me who I am.

John Caher: It sounds like you had very strong role models in your life, and a very strong support system.

Lieutenant Sinclair: I did.

John Caher: Now, how did you end up at the Academy?

Lieutenant Sinclair: I think it was the culmination of my entire life. I just mentioned the martial arts school and growing up in martial arts. My father had me teaching classes at age of 14. So, as a recruit, while I was sitting in the chairs, looking at the instructors, in the back of my head I said, that's where I want to be. I just knew from the time that I sat there watching them, and everything that they were able to share with us and impart their knowledge, and some were fun, some were stern, some were firm, and it was literally a plethora of different delivery mechanisms. So, each of them got up and had their own kind of flair. And I said, I literally said as a recruit, I said, "This is where I want to be. I want to be able to share

and impart this knowledge that I have. I want to be able to influence the next generation.”

That was really what sparked a lot of it. So, it was a culmination of me, like I said, growing up in the environment in which I did, and also being pushed by these role models that I had to aspire for more. I think that working at the Academy is an honor, just being able to tap into and be trusted with the development of that next generation is a big thing.

John Caher: Now, you've been with the court system for quite a while, and at this point in your career, would you recommend the court officer profession to other young men and women?

Lieutenant Sinclair: I would. It is a very, very viable career option. When you think about getting into law enforcement and some of the other options that are out there, there's a lot of pull to other agencies. So, whether it be notoriety, whether it be the perceived toughness of the job, whether it be just retirement or anything, there are a lot of pull factors elsewhere. But I do put the New York State Courts up there with, and next to, any other agency, for the mere fact that there is this thing called “quality of life.” For a lot of people, especially while young, it may not be something that is on the forefront of your mind, but at some point we no longer are young. And these are things that we have to start to think about, because I believe that we spend more time as an adult than we do in youth.

We think about getting married, when you think about the introduction of children into your life and all these other things, these are hurdles that you may not factor in. The New York State Courts offer you the privilege to be able to map out your life— Monday through Friday, nine to five, holidays and everything else are things that in other law enforcement agencies are unheard of unless you have a whole lot of time in. So, do I recommend this and would I encourage people to take the exam and process and get on this job? Yes, I would.

John Caher: Do you think it's fair to say that the court system welcomes and encourages diversity?

Lieutenant Sinclair: I do. I do believe that they encourage diversity within the court system. And I think that it's very important for them to continue that and continue the push to make the court system as well represented as the people that are using it. And I think that's an important task for the job to continue.

John Caher: It seems to be a continuing struggle. As you well know, 30 years ago, the commission that became the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission issued a report indicating that the way court officers treated minorities was a concern. And last year an investigation and report by Jeh Johnson found that that remains a problem. Why is this a recurring issue?

Lieutenant Sinclair: I believe people are well intentioned. And I do believe that the issues that have been highlighted are valid. But I also believe that it is a difficult thing to sustain the enthusiasm, if you will, over time, and people resort back to what they're comfortable with. So, I would say it's a sustainability thing, this momentum, this energy, this enthusiasm that people have, with regards to these issues that have been pointed out. It needs to be sustained, if you will, and followed through on.

John Caher: One of Secretary Johnson's recommendations was to build a bridge between the court officers and the community, and it sounds like you were very much involved in that effort with the Community Affairs program. Can you just tell me what that program is and what it hopes to achieve?

Lieutenant Sinclair: Yes. The Community Affairs program that I'm currently working on is the by-product of Chief Judge Janet DiFiore's response to a lot of the issues that are pointed out. And I do want to say that, in regard to the Chief Judge, we talk about that sustainability. She has obviously shown that she's following through on the things that she has proposed and responds to, and that's a great step forward. So, with regards to this Community Affairs Unit and program, what we're trying to achieve is just being able to connect with the court users, connect with those community members, and just show that the system, and OCA in general, is not only here for the hard, firm response to these situations, but also here as a resource—hearing people out and being part of these community engagement efforts, community outreach efforts, reminding people that there are, outside of just the uniforms, a number of career opportunities within the courts. And help people understand the process through which they can either apply, or even just check to see what's available to them. So, when we talk about this Community Affairs Unit, there's going to be a number of different things that we're trying to achieve, but the main thing is being tapped in, being engaged, and being in communication with the communities that use us.

John Caher: Well, that seems to dovetail perfectly with LEO Hearted Cares, an organization that you founded to bring law enforcement and communities together. Let's talk about that a little bit, if we could. What

does that organization do? And what inspired you to be among its founders?

Lieutenant Sinclair: The mission is to increase public safety and strengthen ties between law enforcement and community. And we accomplish this by a number of different initiatives that we have created, myself and other officers. So, you have Captain Marcus Durham at Ninth, you have Officer Tawana Johnson out at Queens. You have also Glen Sabas, who now works at the Academy. He was from Bronx Housing at the time. You have a bunch of board members like Darian Wagner, all these different officers, Robert Winkler—all these different officers that are coming from literally diverse regions in the court system, whom each of which has had their own kind of experience, either growing up in the city or working in the system, or some other type of experience which has tapped them to say, hey. We need to find a solution.

I was blessed enough to be chosen to represent the New York State Courts in 2016, down in Dallas, after the five officers down there were killed. And shortly thereafter, I was also sent to Baton Rouge, for the three officers, literally two weeks later, that were killed in the line of duty down there as well. So, coming back off the heels of that, and just seeing and meeting and engaging in and conversing with all these officers from all around, literally the world, and the elephant in the room was, what's going on? What are we doing? How are these things going to change? What can we do? So, that was literally sitting on my mind, coming off the heels of those trips. And I sat down with a friend of mine who was the director of Social Outreach and Engagement, Randy Gordon, he's a licensed social worker.

So, you would have myself in law enforcement, a friend of mine in social work, and we're discussing some of the different options. How can we go about trying to tackle this thing? And it literally started with a hashtag, just a hashtag that we put out there, "LEWC"— Law Enforcement Who Care—to change the narrative and to show that there are people within this profession who do care about what is happening within the community. From there, it grew into the 501C3 that we currently have, through which we have a mentoring program. All of our volunteers are officers— we have Corrections, we have PD, we have Port Authority, we have courts obviously, all officers who volunteer their own time to come and mentor these kids.

We have "Look Inside," in which you work with officers from around the city, and it's curated by Leon Tillman, who works in Bronx Criminal. He's

an officer up there. He manages an art studio, and he has wonderful pieces.

We also got tapped into a number of different officers and community members, and the task was to really foster the conversation of community and law enforcement engagement. The idea with that, if you and I are having this discussion about this piece of art on the wall, we can dive into deeper, more complex conversation because it takes some of the personal sting out of the disagreement. We're talking about this object on the wall, as opposed to challenging each other.

We've gotten some good feedback from that. Through "Future Community Stars," we work with a number of different groups of kids, and we pretty much engage them by discussing the pros and cons and defining what community service actually is. Then we have them design one big project, and we help them launch that project and follow it through to its completion, and then we bring in local police, their parents, other community members and say, "Hey, we have a community service project created by children, and which the parents and the officers, community members are being led by those same very children." We're empowering them to be leaders, empowering them to be community minded, and helping the community at the end of the day, a number of different things. We work with local orgs, and just try to get things done on a more grassroots smaller scale.

John Caher: What a phenomenal initiative. And I'd like to thank you for all you do, both inside the court system and from the outside, to build these bridges and make our court system and our community better and stronger.

Lieutenant Sinclair: Thank you. Thank you. Well, it's a team effort. There's a whole lot of people in the background here, who aren't on this call, that I owe a great deal of gratitude to as well.

John Caher: It is a team effort, and I thank you for being a part of that team. And thank you for coming on the program.

Lieutenant Sinclair: Thank you.