

## From Cop To Councilmember

by James Davis

Thursday, November 20, 2003 12:00 AM

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One morning in 1983, I was in front of my house sitting in my mother's car. Suddenly, I was approached by two white police officers who accused me of stealing the car. The officers dragged me from the car at gunpoint, slammed my head and body repeatedly against the car and pointed their guns inches away from my head. I was handcuffed and taken to the police station. No charges were ever filed, but that day, I suffered not only bruises, but also the humiliation of false arrest.

Since that day, I have tried to turn that experience into something positive. I became a correction officer and worked at Rikers Island for two years. A few years later I became a New York City police officer and an instructor at the police academy where I trained officers on proper arrest procedures and how to interact with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In 1991, I started a not-for-profit organization called "LOVE YOURSELF" Stop the Violence to address the growing urban violence. As a part of my campaign, I stopped Toys R Us from selling lookalike toy guns, I denounced violent music lyrics on the radio and images on television during the hours when children are watching and I aggressively protested incidents of police brutality. Now as a City Council member, I bring all my experiences together to help reduce crime and improve policing in the 35th Councilmanic District in Brooklyn and around the city.

I believe a successful police department is one that not only addresses crime, but is also responsive to the concerns of the community. The first step in accomplishing this is making the local precinct a welcoming place. As an African-American I do not always feel welcome when walking into a police precinct. This is true even though I am a former police officer. I compare this feeling to being in a restaurant and receiving poor service. It does not matter how good the food is, if the waiter does not greet you properly and has a bad attitude, you don't want to eat there. On the other hand, if you are greeted with courtesy and respect, it goes a long way towards your feelings about the restaurant. A police precinct is no different. Local residents should be able to go into a precinct and have their needs addressed in a courteous and professional manner. In the academy, police officers are trained that when dealing with crime victims, they should strive to leave them feeling better than when they found them. I take that goal very seriously.

In my City Council district in Brooklyn, there are four precincts: the 71st, 77th, 84th and 88th. That means my district has four different commanding officers with four different styles of policing. Some precincts are more focused on issuing tickets, some are more community friendly, and others are more aggressive in their tactics. My job as the City Council member is to communicate with all these commanders. I also have to help the community learn to embrace good police officers. To just speak out against bad cops is unfair. The community has to acknowledge the good cops also, so that when speaking out against bad cops, there is more credibility to it and the complaint is taken more seriously.

After September 11th, the police department added concerns about terrorism to their local policing responsibilities. I sit on the City Council's public safety committee and recently we met with Police Commissioner Ray Kelly and Deputy Commissioner of Intelligence David Cohen.

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One of the things I asked about was NYPD's cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Before September 11th, the FBI and NYPD worked more independently. Now we need to make sure that there is more of a joint effort so that local police have all the necessary resources to provide maximum security for our communities at large.

As the chairman of the committee on juvenile justice, I am also committed to improving the way New York City handles youth crime. Currently, the juvenile detention centers act as their own school system with a track from one detention center to the next. Too many youths graduate from juvenile detention centers, go on to jail, then go to prison upstate. We have to stop that cycle. Something is wrong when a detention center fails to rehabilitate but instead leads a youth into a permanent life of crime.

Mayor Bloomberg has put \$64.5 million in the budget to expand detention centers. I feel the money should not go into detention, but into prevention. We need to reduce the ratio of youths per caseworker, so we can get kids the help they need. We need to continually reassess our youth crime prevention and detention strategies. Education is the best form of crime prevention. If a person is educated, he or she will be less likely to commit a crime. Class sizes have to be reduced and disruptive kids in our schools need to be properly addressed.

The 35th City Council district in Brooklyn is a diverse community. There are African-Americans, Caribbean-Americans, white Americans and Hassidic Jews all living together in the same neighborhood. When you walk down the street you see lawyers and doctors as well as sanitation employees and firefighters. We have great educational institutions like Pratt Institute, St. Joseph's College and Long Island University. We have a vibrant arts community and powerful churches and religious institutions. I represent all of these people. One of the biggest challenges I face is getting all the elected officials -- the community boards, the other City Council members, the Borough President, the State Senators and Assembly members -- who represent the area to be on the same page. It is our job to make sure that the whole community prospers.

Sometimes, like police officers, politicians forget that the people pay our salaries with their taxes. We have to remember that we are here to serve the people.

*Posted March 25, 2002.*