

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN THOMPSON: COMMUNITY ACTIVIST AND COMMUNITY CONVERSATION PARTICIPANT

Interview conducted by Sharon Press¹

SHARON: Thanks for letting me interview you. Let's start with a little bit of background on John Thompson. Tell me about where you grew up.

JOHN: I grew up on the south side of Chicago in a predominantly black neighborhood. I attended Henry O Tanner Elementary School in Chicago. I know throughout my time in Chicago, I always wanted to be a basketball player, so it went from wanting to be Dr. J to Michael Jordan, from Michael Jordan to Dennis Rodman, and from Dennis Rodman to Charles Barkley. I actually thought that was the path I was gonna go, 'cause I started getting so tall so fast at a young age. But Chicago was pretty rough and the public-school system in Chicago was pretty rough, so I come here to Minnesota, it's like a culture shock. Different things, just different, like I don't think there was one white person in my school in Chicago.

SHARON: ...and then you moved to Minnesota

JOHN: I moved to Duluth Minnesota. I have five other siblings — two sisters, three brothers and I'm the baby of the family. Just recently I took on a program called Safe, and it's a mentorship program for children, and I was asked, "Why would you wanna be a mentor to some of these mentees?" I said, "'Cause I was the little brother all the time." So when I see some of the youth it was a no brainer, I'd be hypocritical not to help, 'cause that's how I was raised... from the butcher on the corner or my next-door neighbor, "You want me to call your mother on you?" If we got out of school early, or we had an early release, my mom would always give us instructions "You go to the neighbor's house", which was Miss Hollandsworth, "You go to Miss Hollandsworth's house, and you better not give her no problems. Whatever they eat for dinner, that's what you are eating for dinner." She'd spank us too, she spanked us and then call my mom. So that's what I was telling this guy about at Safe, I said, "The whole neighborhood raised us." So, I'd be hypocritical not to help raise some of these youth that he has in the Safe program.

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SHARON: So, when you were in Duluth, did you still want to be a basketball player?

JOHN: Yes, I actually wanted to play basketball for UMD, I left all my study habits, I don't even know if I had any, but I left 'em and I brought all my party habits to Duluth, because it was easy to party. There are so many bars and so many parties in Superior, Wisconsin and Duluth, Minnesota, it's a college town. I forgot to study, I forgot to work hard, but I remembered to party. And so, my mom came and got me out of there, and she took me to Ohio. My mom's like, "You didn't get nobody pregnant here in Duluth?" And I went to Ohio and did just that, I had my first kid.

SHARON: And did you graduate?

JOHN: No. When I had my first kid, my mom was paying for a lot of stuff, and my mom was like, "You're not gonna leave this lady with a kid, so you're gonna have to get a job." I actually wanted to be a psychiatrist, and that was gonna be my major, but I had to go to the home builder's institute, and I had to hurry up and take this trade. I wanted to do carpentry, electrical, plumbing — Building Apartment Maintenance, BAM, is what it's called, 'cause I needed to make money, 'cause I had a kid on the way, and my mom's like, "No, I'm not gonna raise your kid." So, she kind of forced me to be a man early, and I always thank her for that, honestly, because I never had my dad. I knew my dad, but he wasn't present in my life. But my mom kept instilling that in me, and all of the boys, that these kids didn't ask to be here, so you're gonna raise 'em, and you're gonna have to sacrifice what you wanna do, in order to make their lives better, so I thank her to this day. I'm fighting for the trades right now, because the trades actually saved my life. Honestly, I would've probably been a deadbeat dad. I don't know, 'cause I was young, so I don't know.

SHARON: How old were you?

JOHN: My first kid was 22. So, I just wanted to make sure that I was the dad that my dad wasn't. I had my first son, he looks just like me, like I would stare at him like man, I created this, I created this kid right here.

SHARON: No denying it right?

JOHN: Wow. That amazed me. You know like when you look, you're holding your baby and you're looking at him like, man, he has my nose, I made this. When he started getting older, I'd buy a different pair of sneakers and a jogging suit, so I had to make sure I found the exact one that he had, so we matched. And everywhere I was at, you'd see me with this kid. I wanted everybody to know that I was happy to have a son.

SHARON: And what's he doing now?

JOHN: He's an accountant.

SHARON: Is he in the Twin Cities?

JOHN: Yeah, he's here in the Cities. Sad part is he went to school to be an accountant, and then people would let him do taxes at tax time, but none of these companies would hire him. I don't understand that. So he does taxes around tax time, and then when people need help with their taxes, but he's been out of school for three years now, he's yet to find a company that will bring him on, and say hey, you can work for this company. I told him that too, you go to Las Vegas, they're hiring accountants left and right for their casinos and all the money they have moving through Las Vegas. It should be the same way here, it's just that these companies are family owned, so they hire family, they train family.

SHARON: So, you went in to do the building and maintenance kind of stuff, and you continued doing that, because you work now as a machinist².

JOHN: That was a little different, because when I first got out of normal business, I moved back to Chicago, and I started to work for the Art Institute in Chicago. I started changing locks and doing building maintenance stuff, moving exhibits and painting, and things like that. I stopped working for the Art Institute, and then I started working for a Steel Foundry, 'cause it was a little bit more money and it was a union job. I think at this point my son is probably like seven. So, I'm working at a steel foundry, and now they're sending me to school, prepping me to be the machinist. At the end of the day, I'm going to school for hydraulics, pneumatics, welding and just sharpening my tools for the trade. I started getting it, and I always read a lot, like if I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna read up on what I'm doing. So, I just honed my craft. Then I decided I wanted to do plumbing. My friend owned the plumbing company, so he was paying me like \$27 bucks an hour, plus training me, and I just told him, "I don't want you to waste your time or your money, "I'm not gonna be passionate for this." But literally like two days later, I'm working for Saint Paul Public Schools. They hired me as an equipment repair tech to repair a lot of the nutrition service equipment throughout the district. That's how I met Philando [Castile]. I was repairing a lot of the nutrition service equipment throughout the district, milk coolers, ovens, microwaves, rooftop condenser units, and walk in freezers, whatever they have in the kitchens that make their nutritious service operation run.

I actually met Philando because one of his ovens was broken. The oven came from somewhere overseas; I remember the schematics being in German, I think. I'm pretty handy, I just don't read German. So, I called 'em back, "I need these schematics in English." I remember it took a long time to get the part, and then I had to figure out the schematics, and I'm calling to Germany, and I can remember the red tape that I'm going through to get this oven, and when I get there Philando has the meanest look on his face, like no matter how hard he tried to be mad, it was always like a silly smirk on his face so like you can't convince me you're mad. "Man, why's

² At the time of this interview John worked for the Saint Paul Public Schools as a Machinist.

it taking so long to get my oven done?” and then he’s laughing, but I know he’s pissed ‘cause he only had one oven. I can’t even explain it. I would never take him seriously when he was angry, because of his glasses. I always thought he was a nerd. Man, you can’t convince me you’re mad at me, you’re gonna have to do a better job, even if you’re mad. But one of the first times that I met him was because it took a long time to get his oven, and we’re talking, and I can remember telling him, I can remember this conversation like yesterday, we were talking about how I represent the person who has taken so long to get your oven done, but that’s not my fault. I can remember telling him that when I show up people only see this blue uniform and the part I have in my hand, and “Damn it, why’s it take you so long,” not knowing what I had to go through to get this part. I had his oven running, it’s fired up and now he has two ovens. I did a good job of disarming, and making him laugh, and making him see that it’s not my fault, it’s not even the district’s fault, it’s these people.

Well it is the district’s fault, because they keep buying these foreign parts. But we just grew a bond from that, and every time I would get a work order to go to his school, I’m telling you, it was always like it would be a job probably take me 30 minutes, but I’ve been there for an hour and a half just talking and laughing, and we’d sometimes have some very deep conversations, like we talked about a lot of stuff. Now I can honestly say I can see him playing chess. I never played chess with Philando, but I could see him playing chess, ‘cause he was very articulate, he was a thinker, so he’d be sitting back thinking, and then he’d speak. I noticed this now after he’s passed, now I notice a lot of things about Philando that I didn’t, I didn’t even pay attention to it.

SHARON: Did the two of you spend any time outside of school district together?

JOHN: Mostly at the school. I have friends that I hung out with after work, and Philando had friends he hung out with after work. I probably saw him a couple of times outside the job. I don’t think Philando went out to bars much or hung out. I would see him sometimes, I’d be grabbing beer at the liquor store or something like that, I’d see him, but we never hung out. He would always say, “Man we gotta hang out.” But he was my friend from work, and I’d see him in the neighborhood a lot.

SHARON: So, take me back to the night when he was killed. When did you know?

JOHN: The night before Philando was killed I spoke to Philando about Alton Sterling [37-year-old Black American shot and killed by Baton Rouge Police Officers on July 5, 2016]. The day before Philando was murdered I can remember us talking briefly, and it was like normal conversation, because it had happened so many times, and we were like numb to it. Honestly, the outcome of what was gonna happen to the officers and things like that, we talked about that, ain’t nothing gonna happen to [the officer] ‘cause the law. We talked about it honestly, and then the very next day it happened to Philando. The ironic part is I saw it, like I’m scrolling through social media, and I saw it.

SHARON: You saw the video as it was happening?

JOHN: Yes, but I didn't know it was Philando, because it was Diamond Reynold's video. It was this posting that was going viral, so I just scrolled right past, 'cause I didn't wanna see it. The next morning I wake up at five AM, so I could be at work at six AM, and I'd always turn on the news, and it says Philando Castile on the bottom, and then I see the sirens, and then his picture shows up, and I'm like, oh my God, that's Phil, whoa. And I woke everybody in the house up, I screamed to the top of my lungs, "They killed Phil." And everybody's like, "Who's Phil?" And then I get a call from the director of nutrition services [Stacy Koppen], she said, "I heard about your friend, I know you guys were very close," so she said, "We have crisis people. Come in if you need to talk to somebody." I had never talked to Philando's mother, but I was trying to figure out a way to talk to her and let her know who I was. I can remember wanting to take off work, but I didn't take off work, because Philando was a part of our family, as far as Saint Paul Public Schools, in that I can remember knowing that our family's gonna need everybody. I can remember thinking that. And when I went to work it was just like I didn't even wanna be there. I didn't wanna talk. This is the day after everything. I didn't wanna talk. I can remember having the work order to fix something at Ramsey, and it was blocked off, everything was blocked off, and I didn't know what was going on at the mansion, but Ramsey Middle School was right up the street, so I get a message on my phone, and I look at the message, and it's Clarence Castile on my message at the mansion speaking.

I'm in my Saint Paul Public Schools work van, in my uniform, with my ID and things of that nature, and I can remember thinking I need to go up to the mansion. I went to the mansion, and I remember this, this is like the day after it happened, I met a lady named Monique Collier. Her nephew was murdered by Saint Paul Police. I can remember meeting her, she gave me the microphone to speak, and the only thing I could think to speak was what I had on my body. I had on my Saint Paul uniform which represented somebody that fixes ovens, somebody that works for a company. This uniform that I have on, I remember speaking that, "This uniform saves my life a lot." I can remember speaking and breathing that into the microphone.

SHARON: The uniform, you were saying the uniform saves your life, because it gives you a certain credibility, or respectability with a cop?

JOHN: Mm hmm. I can remember saying that, Sharon, because I wanted people to know that when I take off this blue uniform, that I am just as dangerous to society as Philando was perceived to be every day, especially driving through Falcon Heights. Like driving through that stretch of Larpenteur, we get profiled even when they're not looking for somebody. We get profiled even when there wasn't a burglary or a robbery, we get profiled. So, we just knew not to drive down that stretch of Larpenteur, unless we were in our professional uniform.

That give us a "he knows who I am," "he knows I'm not a thug." I can remember talking about that over the microphone and saying that Philando wouldn't have got killed had he had on a nutrition service hairnet, and his coat and his glasses. But because he had on a baseball

hat and jeans, and the urban gear.... that's pretty much what got him killed. I remember that day just like yesterday, because when I got off work, I changed clothes on purpose, so that I can come back to the mansion, and then I spoke. And I wanted people to see the difference in the clothes that I wear every day. These clothes get me killed. This hood I have on gets me killed. Officers don't humanize our clothes, our hoodies, our jackets, our shoes, they profile us. And Philando's fate was, he was profiled because of his costume, because of his skin complexion, because of his nose, but had he had on just the badge that said I'm a Saint Paul Public School employee, he'd still be living. I wanted people to know that.

SHARON: It sounds like right from the start you found your voice to speak these truths. And had you done that before?

JOHN: No.

SHARON: Did you know you had it in you?

JOHN: No. I was mad. I was getting mad because people were bashing my friend, in the media they were talking about he smoked marijuana, he's endangering someone's life, the kids, and I'm thinking, I watched Philando navigate the special needs of the kids without looking at the papers because he memorized every one of these kids. He knew every last one of those kids that came through his line. And he hadn't been at that school for a long time. I don't know if you guys knew that. Philando hadn't been at JJ Hill that long but knew all those kids. So, we're not gonna turn the victim into anything other than what he is. He's the victim here. What he's done doesn't justify where he's at right now. So, you're not gonna bash my friend. Did you know Philando played chess? Did you know he likes to play video games? This is what I want you to know about my friend.

SHARON: ... to humanize him.

JOHN: This is why I was angry and upset. So that's pretty much why I came outside, because there wasn't really nobody saying that. People were just mourning and angry, but all along allowing media to portray my friend, and at this point I had already had an earful from Philando's mother, so I really knew how he was raised.

SHARON: So how did that come to be? Because you didn't know her before.

JOHN: No, I didn't know her before. Actually, I left Mama Val a message, she's my mother now. That's my mother, yeah I love Mama. I found out that one of my cousins is related to Valerie Castile's family, and so that makes us kinda related. But I was reaching out to my cousin because I wanted to be one of the pallbearers. He's like, "Just call her," and I called her, and she called me back. And at this point they'd already had the tuxedos and everything, and so I just said,

“I’ll just be there as support.” But she would see me, and I kept going, even after the funeral, I kept going, and I kept going, and I kept going, because one thing she said to me right after he was buried was “Keep your foot on their neck, and apply pressure. That’s how we gonna change something.” So, I just kept going, and kept going, and kept going, and any time I would speak, I would always call her, “Okay, I’m getting ready to go here, is there anything you don’t want me to say? Because I don’t think I have a filter today.” Or I called her for advice like, “I don’t think I should say this. I wanna be able to also represent you.”

A couple weeks after Philando was murdered my mom got injured, and she had an infection in her leg, and the infection went through her body, and my mother died. And so, I didn’t have a mother. And I can remember Philando’s mother telling me, “Yes you do, yes you do. You get out of that rut. Your mother wants you to keep going, and you do have a mother. You want me to make some dinner for you?” And I can remember her making baked chicken, macaroni and cheese, cornbread, and oh man, it was something, it was a huge dinner. She makes the best macaroni and cheese in this state. But I can remember her making me dinner, and just pretty much telling me that “I’m your mother.” And I’m definitely her son, and I’m just one of her sons. She has millions of sons now, but I’m definitely her son. And she supported me ever since my mom passed, she’s been in my corner.

SHARON: Well, it sounds like you supported each other.

JOHN: Mm hmm. She helps me more. I could call her at two o’clock in the morning, and she’ll pick up the phone. “What the heck do you want?” But she’ll pick up the phone and she’ll talk to me. Or I have a problem and I’d be angry as I don’t know what, and I’ll pick up the phone and she’ll say something like, “Okay, so now you’re done being angry?”

SHARON: I don’t know Mrs. Castile, but everything I have heard about her sounds like she’s a really remarkable person in terms of how she has dealt with all of this, and with a sort of a “groundedness,” and I don’t know whether together the two of you moved from the anger, or took that journey of being able to turn a corner and say, ‘yeah I’m angry, but I wanna do something.’

JOHN: She said to me one time, “You have two choices, you can be mad as hell, or you can stand up and fight.” You can’t be both, because you’re not a good fighter when you’re mad. It makes sense, you don’t make rational decisions when you’re mad. You don’t think when you’re mad. So, I have to lose anger, that season’s passed. Do I get angry? Yes, but I just have to be angry, I can’t start trying to think and be angry. I would think after anger. I hope that makes sense.

SHARON: Total sense. Is there a clear point where you made that switch, or has it been an evolution?

JOHN: There was a clear point when I made that switch. We tried to get the [new] training fund named after Philando Castile here at the [Minnesota Board of Peace Officer Standards and Training] POST.³ And I can remember a lot of retired sheriffs, a lot of retired police officers, a lot of police officers throughout this whole state wrote the POST board in opposition. Keep in mind that the governor allotted for this training. They would've never got that amount of money, had this event, this murder, not have happened at Falcon Heights. They would've never gotten that money. They got a nice training facility here in Saint Paul. [Uncle] Clarence Castile was on the POST board, and I can remember him being the only person that wasn't in opposition of having the training fund named after Philando.

SHARON: The only one?

JOHN: The only one. The only one that said he wanted that building, the rest of the post board was no, no, no, no, no, no. We had heartfelt speakers there also, after I seen the cold heartedness on their faces, but then afterwards there's a Minneapolis Police Federation, their go to guy is Bob Kroll, he stood in front of the cameras and he says, "John Thompson who's been "in all the anti-police rallies, and speaks about anti-police everywhere he goes is a known convicted felon." And me and Valerie Castile were sitting right here, and someone's recording him saying this. He says, "And Valerie Castile has pretty much got on TV and called for execution of cops." I was very upset, because I've never been convicted of a felony, I've never been charged with a felony. But then I thought, it's a whole lot of cameras in his face, and I see what he's doing.

SHARON: He's baiting you.

JOHN: I don't know if he understands that there are too many elders in my ear, like, "John there's another way to skin a cat," "John this," and "John that." So, what he was trying to do, I immediately saw that. Defamation of character. I'm not gonna fall for that one. I fell for that too many times, and people already perceive me to be this angry black man. Well I'm angry, I'm angry enough to fight and now I'm gonna prepare myself with the tools to fight with. So, I just start outwitting 'em. They try to bait me still. I just don't respond because my silence is more deadly.

SHARON: You have been so incredibly wise through all of this and it all comes from inside you, 'cause you didn't study it, no one told you... other than your mom.

JOHN: That's funny you say that, because I'm actually doing this class, this project management course I'm taking, it's an online course. And I was nervous at first, because I'm thinking, project management, aw man, and as I'm getting further and further into these courses, I realized that I've already had these skills all my life. I've done project management. When I decided I'm gonna rip all my kitchen tile out, when I decided I'm gonna do a tub surround for someone,

³ <http://www.startribune.com/police-standards-board-votes-against-naming-training-fund-for-philando-castile/436985783/>

I had to actually plan how much it costs, plan if something goes wrong, the what ifs, prepare for something to go wrong. I was always, in Chicago we lived by that motto, proper preparation prevents poor performance, the five Ps, proper preparation prevents poor performance.

SHARON: And who used to say that to you?

JOHN: All my friends, every last one of my friends and my parents. A lot of people in Chicago know about the five Ps, proper preparation prevents poor performance. They probably won't admit it, but they know about it. This is something that was taught to you, if you're from Chicago. I had project management skills, I just didn't have a certificate. But it's very easy for me, the things that you guys see me do now, I've always had that, I just didn't have a certificate. I've always had that, I just didn't have the platform. Now that I've been doing, it's been what, like three years now almost? This is what God put me on this Earth to do. That's my calling. I have never been more passionate about anything in my life ever. Besides machinist work, I've never been more passionate about anything in my life. I can remember talking to our current mayor [Melvin Carter III], and I said to him, "Man, you speak very well." He said to me, "Well you speak very well too." I said, "What's the secret?" He said, "You know what? A wise man once told me, man, when you get in front of that microphone, just speak."

SHARON: You ever have notes with you?

JOHN: No.

SHARON: Do you plan out what you're gonna' say?

JOHN: Oh yeah. I think it through. I may write a few things down, but I won't show you, because I've already read it, and I know where I'm going. I have the bullet points right here, 'cause I've already read it all. I've become very good at that. I've always been that way. I could look down, I could write down an entire speech, and I'll set it down on the podium, and I'll start out and then a certain feeling will come out, this whole speech. So, I think that I've always had that in me, I just never had to use it. Now there's nowhere I go where I don't have to use it.

SHARON: When did you create Fight for Justice LLC?

JOHN: I did that right after I was starting to do a lot more community outreach. I started going to different places and speaking to youth, and I can remember going to Stadium View, which is a juvenile detention center in Minneapolis. They're in jail. And I can remember speaking, and I stayed there for almost four hours. I can remember one kid, his story was heartbreaking. He molested his sister, but when I was talking to him, telling him, "this condition that you're in right now is not your life." He was six feet tall. I can remember telling him positive things, because he's the toughest guy in the prison, and I can remember telling him that. I can remem-

ber telling the correctional officer that also, “he’s supposed to be tough, he’s in jail.” “Well, I see him crying all the time.” “He’s supposed to cry, he’s in jail. He’s 16.” I can remember saying that to him. And the kid was like, “nobody here has ever been as authentic. We hear these speeches about how you can motivate your life and it just sounds like wah, wah, wah.” The director said, “John, you know there’s a guy came here, he spent like 30 minutes, and they cut him a check for \$2500 bucks.” She said, “you need to get your EIN number. You need to be licensed by the state to do this.” And I started noticing, a lot of times I was being pulled in different directions, and people weren’t even making me a sandwich. I would travel to Virginia, Minnesota, on my gas and I’m giving presentations, and I’m facilitating, and I’m speaking, and I’m doing this because this is what I feel God wants me to do, but God don’t want me to be a fool either. So, I listened to Brenda. Brenda Johnson’s running for the commissioner’s seat in Minneapolis. I can remember her giving me that advice. Saint Anthony Villagers for Community Action are serious about changing the paradigm and seeing that played out. So, I can remember them helping me start my LLC.

SHARON: So that was within the first year?

JOHN: Within the first year. That was the reason why I started the LLC, because when people start surrounding you, and telling you that “you’re inspirational,” and “I really love what you’re doing,” people started to see what I didn’t see, ‘cause I still have a hard time seeing that now. I just wanna be me, but people say that, John, you are huge. And they were saying that back then. I see it now, I do see it now, because I have to be very cognizant of what I say, and have to be very, very careful now, because I have a lot of people watching me. So that’s the part I don’t like.

SHARON: What kind of people are watching you?

JOHN: The people that I need to sit down at the table with, and to help change the conditions in our community are watching. And I think I’ve done a good job now of letting them see that I’m not this angry black man, that I am actually somebody who wants change, and I’m actually somebody who will sit down and reason. Somebody who will sit down and that will stay down until we come to a conclusion. Before, people weren’t so receptive. ‘He’s a protestor.’ ‘He’s an angry black man.’ ‘He’s mad because his friend was murdered.’ They didn’t have any idea that I’m articulate when I speak, that I’m very concerned, not only about police and police brutality, not only about what happened with my friend. I don’t want that to happen to my nine-year-old son, and I don’t want that to happen to nobody else’s son, and in order to change these conditions, we gotta change the conditions they live in. So those are the players who are at that table, who can change the conditions that we live in. They’re watching me also, and I don’t wanna give them a perception of this is just a loudmouth who we can’t work with. I could be a loudmouth, but for the right reason.

SHARON: What are you most proud of in this work?

JOHN: Being able to change people's mind and knowing that I'm doing that. Being able to change people's perception of African American men and knowing that I'm doing it. I've witnessed that. You ever see these church shows, where the pastor will touch somebody on the head and they'll just fall out? I've been in church, and I've seen someone catch the Holy Ghost right next to me several times, and we were just standing next to each other singing. What happened there? I never thought that that was real, never. And then [after I spoke one time] this lady grabbed me, and she said, "John, you have changed the way I think," and she starts crying. If that's what the Holy Ghost feel like, I'm shaking, and my body's tingling, because this a white woman and she grabs me, and I'm thinking that I did something wrong to her. She's crying. I'm just John Thompson to me. I've never in my life had someone tell me that I've changed their life. Then I see elected officials and politicians, and different congressmen, and people running for governor, and I'm in all these spaces that I've never been before in my life. And they're telling me the same thing, "John, honestly, I'm gonna work with you, and I'm gonna help you." Before, nobody wanted to help me. Everybody was just like, oh my God, he's just an angry black yeller. I thank Melanie Leahy for that. Mel said to me, "In order to play the game, you need to learn how to play the game. You can't just pull the Monopoly board out and figure out how to play. You gotta read the directions, and I'm gonna show you how to play the game." She said, "Baby you can catch a whole lot more bees with honey." I can remember that too. That's why Mel's my good friend, that's my mother too.

SHARON: And how did you meet her?

JOHN: Oh, wow Sharon, I met Melanie Leahy at the city council meeting in Falcon Heights. I was yelling at Peter Lindstrom, the mayor, the city manager, the councilmen, I'm yelling at them because I wanna know what is it that you're gonna do? We were at every city council meeting. At this particular meeting there was no public input, there was no public speaking. They [the Council] were only speaking, and they had to speak out loud for the recording.

I didn't know that; I could care less. I know two weeks ago my friend was murdered here. And everybody with me, and it was probably about 350 people with me. Everybody with me, we don't care, we don't care to hear about your budget. We were very upset, 'cause we wanted to know, let's get to this topic right here. It's still business as usual, it's still business that has to go on. As I look at it now, there's still business that had to go on with that city, regardless to what happened to Philando. And that's exactly what was taking place in this particular meeting. So, I understand what Melanie was saying, when she said, "You don't even know how to play the game." When she was talking to me, a lot of the people I was with were pulling me away from Melanie. Like, she's one of them, they hired her to silence the crowd. And she grabs me again, and this time she grabs both of my hands, because I've spoken, and I've spoken to Peter Lindstrom, and I'm telling him that I'm here, even though my mother is on her death bed, I'm here. And I started crying, because I'm sad. And she grabbed me, and at this point it's no more about Falcon Heights, it's no more about Philando, it's no more about any of these people here. She grabbed my hands and she squeezed 'em in a way that my mother squeezed my hands. And

she says something to me that my grandmother said. My Great Grandma Ella Mae Banks said, "When there's chaos, just pray." Melanie said, "Baby, come here, let me pray with you." So now everybody that's talking to me, I hear a lot of what's in the background, but I hear this in slow motion, let's pray. And so we went to the front, and she grabbed my hands, and she prayed for me, and she prayed with me for about a good 20 minutes, and then she gave me her phone number, and she let me go back in there, and she didn't pressure me, she didn't say, don't go in there and talk. She gave me her number, and she said, "I'm gonna keep praying for you." I gave her my number, and since then, she's taken me out to lunch one time, me and my wife, she'd taken us out to lunch, and she said, "I'm gonna be your spiritual mother." And at this point I'm yelling at –

SHARON: Peter [Lindstrom]?

JOHN: Not Peter, I'm yelling at people like Tony Cornish,⁴ and I'm yelling at these guys. And she said, "I see you, but you gotta remember the honey in the jar?" I didn't know what happened with Tony Cornish was gonna happen. I didn't know that. But I can remember telling him that next year you will not have this seat. I can also remember Melanie telling me, "Didn't I tell you?" She was like a coach though, you know how you always have the tools, but you just don't quite know how to use 'em? So, Melanie's like "this is a phillips screwdriver here, and the only screws you can turn with that have a cross here, and this is a flathead, and this is an allen wrench." Melanie is that person who showed me how to use the tools that I already had. She didn't have to give me tools, she said, "You already have the tools. Choose the right one. John, your voice is like the tools you use in your trade. Sometimes you walk in a room, and you gotta use a jackhammer, and sometimes you just use sandpaper, smooth it out. Sometimes you gotta use the jackhammer and then use the sandpaper, but you've got the tools."

Well, I guess that's how I got here, it's because I started using the tools that I already had and didn't even know I had in my tool belt.

SHARON: At that time, from the Falcon Heights City Council's perspective, there were a lot of tough meetings so [Mayor] Peter [Lindstrom] reached out to [Professor] Kathy Quick, and said, "I need help."

JOHN: I love Kathy too.

SHARON: Peter and Kathy knew each other previously, and at that point they were putting together the task force, and Melanie [Leahy] was a co-chair along with Randy [Gustafson]. And Kathy brought in Mariah [Levison from the Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution], me, and [Professor] Raj [Sethuraju] to help with the community conversations. Can you talk

⁴ State Representative from Southern Minnesota who posted on his facebook page a picture in support of Officer Yanez. <https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2016/07/28/tony-cornish-philando-castile-officer-shirt/>

about them, did you wanna go to those community conversations? What did you think about them?

JOHN: No, actually I didn't wanna go because first of all, I figured they would only pick people who weren't affected by the tragedy. They would only pick people who were residents of Falcon Heights, and it was just gonna be like every other meeting that I went to. I'd been to several meetings that nothing ever came out of it, but this city has an opportunity to do something different.

I honestly thought that they could flip the switch and get rid of Saint Anthony Police, and that'd be the end of it. I was dumb to the process, is what I'll say. So, I'm not gonna come to any of these meetings, because it's a waste of my time and everybody that's with me, they're not coming either. All the people who stood in solidarity with me, we weren't coming to a doggone task force meeting, because this is just to quiet the crowd. And I didn't attend, and Melanie kept calling, "Baby just come to this one." "I'm not coming." "All right." Then she'd call again, "Come to this one." Peter Lindstrom called and invited me. Valerie Castile called me, and it was the last one. Melanie had called me at least six or seven times, trying to get me to come, and she's persistent, but she wasn't forcing me. She's like, "All right, baby." And she'd call at the next meeting, "You know we're having another one, you wanna come?" Valerie Castile called me, and she says, "Melanie has been talking to me, and she says she's asked you to come." She said, "I went to one of 'em. You should go." And Philando actually talked to me that day. The day I went, Philando was like, "Man, just go and see. Go, if you gotta get loud, get loud." I was going to actually get loud, and when I walked in, Peter Lindstrom was in there, and we were in group discussions, but he's saying stuff like, "I'm just a new mayor." He's saying stuff like, "I became the mayor because I wanted to make a difference, and this shit just fell in my lap." He's saying that. He can't say that from behind a bench at the city council. I see a human being now, and he had tears in his eyes. I was just on his front lawn, like "you have my friend's blood on your hands." I had no idea; I didn't think what if somebody did that to me, and I didn't know what to do? That'd be very intimidating. I didn't think about how hurt my kids would be if I was the mayor of the city, and people were calling me. I didn't think about that. I didn't think that until I saw Peter Lindstrom at the [community conversation]. He's like, "what is it that the community wants?"

Peter Lindstrom was talking in a way that I've never seen a mayor talk before, because they have to be a certain way. I had only seen mayors on TV, I've only seen 'em behind the bench, I've never seen 'em in a community setting, where they're speaking and could care less how politically correct. At this particular time, he wasn't politically correct Peter Lindstrom, he was very vulnerable.

SHARON: and authentic?

JOHN: He was authentic. I could feel for a man who has tears in his eyes. "This just fell in my lap. I'm trying to fix it. I have no idea how to fix it." At this point it's like a little light, then I'm telling 'em, "if you guys worked together, there'd be a [positive] spotlight on Falcon Heights, and other states will come here, and they'll ask how you did it." I'm telling these guys this, but I'm

not practicing what I preach. I didn't know that in order to change you have to be part of the process, I just want you to change. Had I not come to the [community conversation], I'd have missed out on a great opportunity. A lot of this stuff that you see me doing now is because I attended and I know the process.

There are some bad elected officials, so I can't say I will never yell at elected officials again, there's just some that just need to be yelled at, but I would never treat another human being, the way I treated Peter Lindstrom. I can call him right now, and he's fine. Let's go to dinner. I thought that he knew. I should've sat down and had a conversation with him before, but I was so angry, because there was nothing but meetings after meetings, after meetings, after meetings, after meetings.

Everything that he said he wanted to do from the time it happened, he did. Everything he said, even when we were giving him hell, he did. He told us we're gonna form a task force. "We don't care about your task force. We don't need this." We were shooting down every idea. Everything that he said he was gonna do for that city, he's done. And he actually said, "What do you want?" and the city said, this is what we want.

I can honestly tell you, I can drive down Larpenteur Avenue now, until I get to Saint Anthony, then I get nervous. But I can drive down Larpenteur Avenue, and I see Ramsey County sheriffs, and they wave. I can go to the Philando Memorial right there, and they'll pull over and engage. They're human. They actually say, my name is officer A, B, C, honestly because of what the community said they want in their police officers. So, if someone was to ask me, how does it work? I have a blueprint, I've watched it. I actually have a blueprint, I watched it work. And for people who are fighting and resisting, I was there, so I actually know, you have to be a part of the process, or you are just complaining.

There may be times when you have to be the loudest mouth in the room, so that they know you're serious. But then there's also a time when they know you're serious, or you're gonna have to sit down and show you're serious. I don't know how else to put it, but the city of Falcon Heights, they have beautiful flowers coming out of the concrete now.

Melanie [Leahy]'s the new city councilwoman, and Randy [Gustafson], and Sack [Thongvanh]'s the city manager. Sack has always been even keeled, laid back, he never showed anger, he had a poker face all the time. But then just talking to Sack, he knew the process would work. I guess he just had to get people to buy-in. I'm glad that they didn't buckle. I'm glad that they called you guys.

The reason I came back [to the community conversation] was 'cause I saw brother Raj [Sethuraju], like, okay Peter Lindstrom has Raj here? Raj is one of us. That's my brother too. Raj is here, wait a minute, there has to be something, 'cause Raj is not gonna buy into no crap. So there has to be something here. I'm more interested in seeing if Raj could help change these people's mind, and I could help him in any kind of way. I'm more interested in helping him because now I have an ally right here. They did a very good job changing the way that people view Falcon Heights, changing the way that people view the city, the council, and the mayor. There are still a few people who think that it can be something different done, but as far as Falcon

Heights, they don't even know, there's so many cities gonna come and ask them how, why. So many places.

SHARON: Unfortunately, this is not going to be the last city that will have to deal with this.

JOHN: But [now] they have a blueprint. You're absolutely right. I always say that too. It's like these snuff movies that we watch, and there's another one coming soon to a television set near you. There is. We just had one in LA with the last name Clark [Stephon Clark].⁵ We just had that, and he was at his grandma's house.

SHARON: In the back yard.

JOHN: It always amuses me why people seem to think that anger's not an emotion that you should have. Like what other emotion should you have when you see stuff like that? Anger's an emotion that's gonna be the initial emotion. People have to process this, and we shouldn't have to digest this at all. But we have to know, it's a part of reality.

SHARON: Do you think that there needs to be an incident that makes people come together to talk and to change? Did Philando have to be killed in order to do that? Falcon Heights is just one community. There are how many other communities around us? Could/should all of those communities be doing what Falcon Heights did and have these kinds of conversations?

JOHN: You know what? Yes, they should, because there is a reason why it's happening. There are several reasons why it's happening. If we can change those, then we won't see it anymore, but until we're able to all come together and share those stories, it won't change. I'm a firm believer in in order to change the conditions in our community, we have to change the conditions in our community. So, if you don't wanna see another young African American man get killed at the hands of the police, you have to change the conditions they live in. If you don't wanna see another African American male get profiled by the police, you have to change the conditions they live in. What makes an African American young male think it's cool to have his pants sagging all the way down? I'd profile your butt if I was a cop, honestly, but now I'm starting to see, a lot of times we don't do a good job for ourselves. And I'm starting to see very prestigious, very educated black men wearing their pants like that, not knowing that you will get profiled. I don't care how you wear your clothes. If that's the style, that's the style.

SHARON: People should be able to wear whatever they want, even if it's not what I would wear. It certainly is not a reason to be killed. Are you hopeful that things are changing?

JOHN: I'm gonna make sure things change, I'm gonna be the change that I'm looking for, it'll start with me, and it'll work on everybody else. So yes, I am hopeful, I don't have time for doubt. I am actually a change agent. I like to consider myself a professional black man. I've seen things

⁵ <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/crime/article217941725.html>

change in just one city within what, a year and a half time period? Philando Castile was responsible for a lot of elected officials that we have now in office deciding to run for office. Philando Castile is a conversation still worth having in a lot of different circles, and they're still having it. They may not just say Philando Castile, but Philando has opened the eyes, a lot of eyes, and he's talking right now, he's actually talking in this room with you right now. He's talking at Minnesota Art Institute, he's talking when he, Philando just paid [\$45,000] odd dollars over to [Saint Paul District], I don't know if you knew that.⁶

SHARON: Yes, I did.

JOHN: Philando's talking very loud right now and people are listening. But it doesn't have to have his name on it, but when you asked earlier, did Philando have to die, I believe yes, I believe my friend was a martyr.

SHARON: It changed the trajectory of a lot of lives.

JOHN: Philando Castile is one of the reasons Colin Kaepernick⁷ doesn't have a job right now. I do have hope.

SHARON: I wanna ask you one other thing about allies. What role do allies play, and what can allies do to support?

JOHN: There was a murder in north east Minneapolis of Justine Damond⁸ by a Minneapolis cop. A lot of my allies are white, and I always said to them, that sometimes you get into rooms I can't get in. Sometimes your finances are larger than mine will ever be. So those are two areas that'll help support a movement, because we need you. We need those white voices, we need the finances, and sometimes they have to open the door, and then say, this is my friend, 'cause odds has it if I knock on the door, they'll be like, no you can't come in. But if I come in with a friend, and I'm just putting it that way to make people understand where I'm coming from.

Let's go with grant writing. How many African American men know how to write grants? But I have allies who know how to write grants, who can get me in a position. I have different allies, and I wouldn't be able to do any of this stuff, had I not had allies. Also remember this, black and white as far as race, is crazy. I've never seen a person this color [pointing to a white piece of paper], and I think I would remember it. We're all human, and we're all allies in this. We're all what we call a community, from the Justine Damond and justice for occupation for Philando to these different people who have formed this community since these tragedies have

⁶ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/school-lunch-debt-philando-castile/>

⁷ <https://en.volve.com/2016/09/04/colin-kaepernick-fired-from-49ers-after-disrespecting-police-and-national-anthem/>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/23/justine-damond-family-of-australian-shot-dead-by-policeman-to-file-civil-lawsuit-in-us>

happened in our community, allies included, we need your unity. We need your unity, and you can't spell community without?

SHARON: Unity.

JOHN: There you go. So those are the ways that allies can help. Speak, be unapologetic when you speak in these rooms, honestly let 'em know exactly what's wrong. Call it out, call it out, because it's on system managers. Call it out in the areas where I'm not able to call it out. A lot of times I'll call it out, and people will say, he's intimidating. I have two gears, there's first and second. I try to stay in first gear a lot, because second gear can be pretty intimidating. I'm not trying to intimidate you, I'm trying to open your eyes, and I may have to be a little bit louder. But there are people who have become allies of mine who know now, because they've taken the time to get to know me, that he's not intimidating. Now what do they call me? A Care Bear. He's a soft Care Bear.

I don't like that term though. But you have to convince the people who are still in their bubble, to let me in their bubble. Then when I get in their bubble, and they see that he's just a "Care Bear," then I can start to change how you view people who look just like me. 'Cause I can come in here with my hat cocked, pants sagging, and be very articulate, but you wouldn't give me that chance based on what I have on. What about what's inside this shirt? I got a heart that beats. I have mother that really loved me. I had a friend who was really special, not only to me, but to the community, taken away from us. I don't have time to be angry at you no more, I don't have time to yell at you no more, I don't have time to be intimidating to you. I'm gonna show you how to love everybody. That's where I'm at with it.

I'm gonna back away, but first, I am gonna plant in your garden, and I'm gonna come back and pour some water on it. And I'll leave you alone, come back and pour a little bit more water on it, I'll leave you alone, and I'll come back, and before you know it, you're like, John, you just planted some beautiful flowers in front of me. "Hey, remember I told you. You just saw seeds and dirt, and every time you turned your back, I poured a little more water on it." That's my blueprint now.

This journey that I've had has taught me more than any school I've ever been to, it's taught me more than any life experience I've ever been through. This journey right here. I never thought I can cry in front of people, always man up. It's okay to be emotional, it's okay to be angry, it's okay to be sad, it's okay to be talked about. People talk about me, that's okay. "Well they talk about Jesus Christ, John. Who are you? I can remember Melanie telling me that. Melanie said "John, who are you? They talk about Jesus, are you somebody special? You're nobody, you're just John. Come on now." I would call her with some nonsense like that, so you can see why I say Mel's my mother.

SHARON: But give yourself some credit, you know who to reach out to, and when you need to talk.

JOHN: Sharon, you know what? Honestly, I've always surrounded myself by positive people, always, and I'll tell you why, because as a kid my mom used to pick my friends. Even though I wanted to hang out with a knucklehead, she'd be like, "I'm telling you now, "he ain't gonna be nothing," or "I'm telling you now, he's gonna be standing in front of the liquor store begging for change, I'm telling you." She would actually tell me what my so called friends would be doing, and I'm not even kidding you, every last one of 'em are doing exactly what my mother said they would be doing, every last one of my friends. I told my son exactly the same thing my mother said to me about every last one of his friends, and every last one of his friends are doing exactly what I told him. 'Cause I watched, but you hope to break [the cycle]. I'm gonna change our conditions, there's gonna be a paradigm shift. There ain't gonna be too many more police shootings here, not just here in Minnesota, but throughout the United States. That's my target, locally is fine, but if I could reach people outside of Minnesota, that's my target, because there's a way to change that, but you have to actually get people to buy in. You gotta get people to see that it worked for me. People see me, and they've seen what I've done, and how I've evolved from who I was and who I am right now. I don't do this for recognition, I don't get paid, it's definitely not a paycheck. I do it because I'm serious. I do it because I've had conversations with God. I do it because I've had conversations with Philando, and with my mother, with Philando's mother. This is why I do this, because this is my calling, this is what God put me on this Earth to do. It's so easy for me to do stuff for free, it's easy for me to do it, because God said go do that. God said to me, you've got a job, you've got to volunteer. Okay, okay, I'm very obedient. When I stop being obedient, I always bump my head and I wind up with a big old knot and need ice, and I'm calling Mel crying. So, I'm an obedient man, and I know that it's gonna pay off. I know that at some point, I'm not gonna be able to do machinist work anymore, because they've already told me. Actually, the chief engagement officer [at Saint Paul Public Schools] told me at work, "You've outgrown this position." So, I am worried about how I'm gonna support my family doing this, but I know this is gonna be what I do for the rest of my life. I'm a professional speaker.

SHARON: You are.

JOHN: And I dream about this, I don't know if I shared this with you, but I dream about this a lot, I think I've had the dream probably a few days ago. It's always a dream and I'm being called out from behind the curtain, and I walk out, and there's a podium right there, and I look out, and there's thousands of people, and I'm getting ready to faint, this is the dream, I'm getting ready to faint, and I look over the crowd, so I don't see anybody and I don't pay attention, and I just talk from my heart.

I have this screen behind me, and I'm just clicking, and I'm talking, and I'm clicking, and I'm walking, and I'm clicking, and I'm engaging the crowd, and I'm clicking, and then when I'm done, everybody's standing up clapping. And then people are waiting to meet me, and they're like, "John, thank you, that was very inspirational, and inspiring." I've had this dream maybe 30, 40 times. So, if it keeps being a dream of mine, I know that this is my calling. And I do it now.

I just was at the brand-new comedy theater. I don't think we had a seat in the house, but they have a monthly series called Assata Speaks.⁹ Nekima Levy-Pounds owns Black Pearl and she does this monthly series, it's like TED Talks. But, I just put on a power point presentation called "Beyond the Angry Black Man," and Andre Koen, who is a friend of mine, is like, "John, don't care how many times you do it, just keep doing it. Keep doing it until you get tired of it, and then when you get tired of it, do it some more, because it's very powerful, keep doing that powerful." I told him, I've done it a hundred times and he said, "Well, do it a hundred more times." I said, "But, Andre I have two more power points." "No, do the angry black man."

I have put on this presentation, to me it feels like over 200 times. I've presented this at the Department of Human Rights symposium last year, I'm working on something else now, I wanna present that. And he's like, "No John."

The reason why I brought up Assata Speaks is because I'm in a crowd, I walk out, and there's a screen with the Fight For Justice logo, and I had the clicker.

SHARON: So, it felt like the dream?

JOHN: Wow, I know what to say, but it changes. I still have the same images, but what I say changes depending on the feeling I get from the crowd. I've actually mastered an art that many don't have, and I didn't know that until one of the professional speakers came to me, like, "Have you ever done this before?" "Yeah, I've done it before, but not for this many people." "Man, you have something that people go years without having that."

I just want the truth to come out on that screen, and I think God has a mission for me, is what I tell this guy. So, it's coming, I know it's coming. And that's my dream, that's pretty much how I'm gonna feed my family, that's how I'm going to provide for my family. I love being a machinist, I used to be passionate about being a machinist. I've never been more serious about nothing in my life.

SHARON: Well, now we just have to figure out how to make that dream real, live it.

JOHN: Hey, do you know about Toastmasters?

SHARON: Yes.

JOHN: I go to Toastmasters because they're gonna train you on how to be [effective as a speaker] and I get there, and the guy who's running the program says to me, "You're John Thompson. You're wasting your time here." He's like, "People here watch you."

SHARON: Yeah, they've got nothing to teach you.

JOHN: That's exactly what he said. He says, "You could stay if you wanna talk," but he's like, "Man, you got it, I don't even know why they would send you here, you've got it. These people

⁹ <https://www.blackpearlmmn.com/assata-Sharoneaks>

here don't have it and I'm telling you, we watch you. I can remember one of the other guys playing you on Facebook." So, I'm thinking, okay, I just probably wanted that Toastmasters...

SHARON: certificate?

JOHN: You're right. I'm trying to build this resume to guide me in the right direction. But if I got it, how do I use it? I don't know how to figure that out. I've talked to several people who have done it, several people who I know, who are currently doing it. They're like, "Oh John, we'll put you in." So far, it's only you guys [DRI] and the Kettering [Foundation].

SHARON: Yeah, so I'm still hopeful that we're going to be able to help you reach an audience that would pay you. I know, you have to get to that next level where people are paying you to speak.

JOHN: I'm very patient. Patient is part of being obedient, and I'm following what Mel tells me to do to the tee. So, patience is one of the things that she definitely instilled in me. "John, you gotta be patient." Without Mel, without Kathy Quick, without Peter Lindstrom, Sack, oh man, Randy Gustufson¹⁰. Randy is my twin brother now, I don't know if you could tell the resemblance, but without those guys, I'd be probably still sad. I'd probably still be crying and having to go see a behavioral help specialist. I honestly, I don't go see a behavioral help specialist too much, because I go into these rooms, and there's an audience, and the audience is my behavioral help specialist.

SHARON: And you have to know that you've changed others, too. I remember the first conversation I had with the City of Falcon Heights. It was the first time I met Melanie too, and I can't even remember what was said, but it was something so insensitive, so wrong, and there was a pause, and then Melanie just came in and said the most wonderfully understanding and corrective thing. And I thought, she's brilliant. Not everyone started with an understanding of other's experiences. But, through the work of the Task Force, with Melanie, with you, and with the Community Conversations, people learned.

JOHN: There was a moment at the Kettering Foundation where we had homework. You had to engage with somebody who you haven't engaged with. I engaged with this cop. He's crying, "I don't want my son to be a cop," and he's telling me he lost a son. And he's like, "How do I tell people and get people to feel how I feel?" I told him, "Do the same thing I'm doing. Honestly, I think that me and you should tell this story all over the United States, because people don't know that there are police officers that don't want their kids to be cops. People don't know that you even cry, people don't even know that you shop at Cub Foods. People don't know if you barbecue... invite friends over? ... do anything, or be anything other than a police officer?" And

¹⁰ Randy Gustufson was the Co-Chair, along with Melanie Leahy, of the Falcon Heights Task Force on Inclusion and Policing and is currently the Mayor of Falcon Heights.

I'm talking to this guy, and he's like, "You know what, yeah, I've never seen a cop cry. I've never seen a cop say, 'I'm tired of people judging us like this.' I've never seen that."

Where is he? Put him on TV, or put him in front of an audience, put him in front of people and make this cop the cop that makes people see the real person inside, 'cause there's a person inside of his shirt that has a heartbeat. The guy was crying, "my son just called, he graduated from the academy, he's about to be a cop, and I don't want my son to be a cop 'cause I just lost a son last year and I'm the damn police chief in this small town, so I'll be his boss." He's saying that to me and he starts crying, and it's like I'm off guard with it.

I'm ready to go into all about how we need to have African American cops, and he took over the conversation, and then he said, "How do I get people to see what I see?" That's the same thing Peter Lindstrom did to me sir, I'll have you know. Now, I don't see "officer so and so," I see, his name is Paul, so I see Paul. I see Paul as somebody's dad. I see Paul as somebody that wants to get off work and crack a beer and turn on his gas grill and put on a steak. We have no idea if [cops] ever take off, we think you're cops 24 hours. We never see you, and when we do see you guys in Walmart, you're walking like you still got your gun holster on, and you're ready to be a cop. You're like Robo Cop, when it's okay to just loosen up, to say, "I'm off work."

Because of the exchange that I had with this guy, now, when I'm in stores and see police officers, I actually go and engage and say to them, especially African American cops, "thank you for being in our neighborhood." 'Cause people always tend to say, we need an African American cop in the neighborhood. Well, we got 'em now, now let's support 'em. I get, "Aw John you're for the police 'cause you working with the police." No, we now have what we asked for here.

The same thing just happened in Minneapolis. We have a new Police Chief Arradondo¹¹ in Minneapolis. We asked for someone that looks just like us to represent us. He has his hand out. I don't know if people know that he has his hand out. So, when he asked me, "John, how come I can't get community?" I have to answer when I don't wanna answer. I say to him, I always have these weird analogies, and I said to Chief Arradondo, I said, "It's kinda like you're in a long term relationship, and you cheat on your girlfriend, and then she takes you back. And then you cheat on her again, then she takes you back, and then you cheat on her again, and she takes you back. Eventually this woman's gonna say, 'This is a cheating ass man, and I don't want nothing to do with him.' So, when you ask how do we fix this... how do we build a bridge? Well, we keep trusting you, and you keep cheating on us." I'm hoping that [Arradondo] is not the boyfriend that cheats on us, honestly. And then I see in the paper where he's like, "I'm not arresting people for low level marijuana offenses no more. We don't have room." I see him doing it, because a lot of the people that are being arrested are African American men. I just saw that last week in the paper. He's showing it.

SHARON: Trust is an interesting concept, because it's hard to build, really easy to break, and then it takes time to rebuild. Trust doesn't happen overnight.

¹¹ <http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-city-council-unanimously-reappoints-arradondo-as-police-chief/502194331/>

JOHN: You're right. I know I wouldn't wanna trust someone who kept cheating on me. I don't care how much I love you, I'm always gonna sleep with one eye open. But I wanna trust. This thing with the police, I know at some point we will need them, but we don't wanna to because we think they are going to cheat again.

SHARON: Right, small steps.

JOHN: I would like for every interaction to be a good outcome. They asked me about Ramsey County, what's happening different now that make people more receptive to having Ramsey County Sheriffs in Falcon Heights? I observed one of the traffic stops of an African American male. Actually, I do that a lot. If I see a cop pulling over, I will pull over too and start recording. So, I saw a traffic stop and I didn't know the cop, but he was a white cop. He got out of the car, and he said, "My name is ____." He's a Ramsey County Sheriff, so he's like, "Yeah, that's what we do."

So, he got out of the car, and he says, "My name is Officer XYZ, do you know why I pulled you over? Okay, the reason why I pulled you over is because you're going a little bit over the speed limit. Are you in a hurry today?" "Yeah, I'm in a hurry, I'm trying to get to _____". And, the guy didn't even get a ticket. I was recording this, and then I turned it off. I don't even have to record it. He's actually dealing with a human being. So, this kid's not scared, he's not. And I'm quite sure when the lights came on in that [police] car, the kid's like, "Oh here we go." But the officer...

SHARON: Deescalated the situation.

JOHN: He dictated how that traffic stop was gonna go. I guess this officer said, "I don't have time for the BS today, listen, my name's officer so and so, I pulled you over because of this." He didn't even say, "Do you have any idea how fast you were going?" That's one of those things, 'cause when an officer asks me, "John, do you know how fast you were going?" "Yeah, I was doing the speed limit," 'cause I don't want a ticket. But, then the officer's like, "Oh now you're being smart." Honestly this officer, he dictated how this traffic stop was gonna go from start to finish. I honestly knew from what he was saying to the kid that he wasn't getting a ticket, he wasn't getting his car towed. He didn't even ask for his driver's license, he didn't even ask for his license. He said, "Were you in a hurry?" "Yeah, I'm in a hurry, I work right up the street here at Pizza Hut, right there on the corner of Larpenteur, and I just don't wanna be late." The cop said, "Well you gotta slow down, because one accident and you're late anyway." And then he says, "I'm not gonna write you a ticket, I'm gonna cut you a break, 'cause you're just going right here." He let him go. Honestly that has never ever, as long as I've been in the state of Minnesota, that has never happened at Falcon Heights, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever. I've always seen the tow truck coming, I've always seen another cop pull up behind him. There was just one Sheriff, not two Roseville cops coming in from Saint Anthony surrounding this car. It was just one Sheriff, normally when they see me, what are you doing here? He didn't mind that I was

standing there, and I would turn my phone off, 'cause I was close enough to hear his conversation. I haven't shared that with many people, because I don't want them to get big headed, I want them to keep doing that. That's what works.

SHARON: That is a great end, to come full circle.

JOHN: Yeah, keep doing that.

