Episode 8 Words from a law enforcement officer

Jen Lee
Thank you for joining me today for another episode of I Need Blue. For previous episides you can visit, www.ineedblue.net. I'm excited to share this conversation with you. I spoke with James who is a current law enforcement officer. He began his career three years ago. Keep in mind, names have been changed, and locations are not disclosed.

I enjoy having the opportunity to speak with people from all over the United States, and share their diverse experiences each offer. This includes James.

Thank you for being here today. I'm going to jump right in with your first question. How does law enforcement help our communities?

James
I think law enforcement is very proactive now. There's a lot more community policing and community outreach. There are things we do behind the scenes you just don't see. Just by presence, we try to keep crime down.

Jen Lee
I know you are not in New York or Chicago or an area like that. Different regions experience different things. Without disclosing your exact region, what are the nature of your calls?

James
 Most of my calls that I'm dealing with are going to be domestic. I work nights. So I deal with a lot of drunks, domestics, more of the violent side of stuff that we end up having to go to. Medical calls, a lot of medical calls because where we are, we respond before an ambulance crew will get there. We are going to be the first people you see.

Jen Lee
You talked about having presence in your community. I know our Sheriff, Sheriff Ivey, is heavily involved and invested in our community. He is present at charity events, Mayor events, all different types of things. How is your law enforcement department involved in your community?

James
The Sheriff's Department does a lot of outreach. We're a little bit different because of our area; the way our county is laid out. There's several different communities, and they tend to focus on communities that need a little more assistance.

Jen Lee
The pattern of crime. How does it escalate?

James
You're gonna have your crimes of opportunity, which are, somebody leaves their purse, or wallet or phone or something in their car. I'll just use theft as an example. They might be walking by, see it, look around, nobody's there, they snag it take off. After a while, the fear that keeps them from committing the crime, isn't there. And they move up, and they'll do it while somebody is watching. And even if they are caught, it doesn't necessarily stop that cycle. They'll break into a house while somebody's there. And then from there, it can escalate up into violent crimes. It's just basically they're becoming callous to the fear.

Jen Lee
How is your partnership with the legal system?

James
Very interesting partnership. We work closely with them. We know the prosecutors and the District Attorneys and the State's Attorneys etc. They can make or break what we do. As law enforcement, what I've discovered is other than like going to the grand juries and jury trials and stuff like that, I tend not to follow my cases.
Once I've made an arrest sometimes it is better that I don't know the outcome. It can basically kill some of the desire to do the job. For example, if I arrest somebody for jaywalking (but you don't arrest people for jaywalking) say every time I do that, the State's Attorney drops it to something else. It's not gonna make me wanting to enforce that law. So the way theS tate's Attorneys and District Attorneys handle cases can directly affect law enforcement, and how we do our job, and even our desire to do our job. I'm lucky enough that we have some very good state's attorneys and district attorneys in our area, some are not as good. But that's everywhere. It's a very intertwined relationship.

Jen Lee
I can't imagine, as a law enforcement officer, if you were doing your job, you caught the criminal and then it was determined to let them go. That's got to be frustrating.

James
It's a two fold issue there.
One is the prosecution. And that is a sometimes hard to deal with. The fact is you're going out and you're doing what we think is right for the community and arresting and enforcing laws. Then it's basically negated by some of the legal system. Our juvenile system isn't the best and we see a lot of that.
There's other areas in the adult courts, where you'll have serious offenses just pled down because they don't want to deal with trials are that sort of thing. It's really disheartening when you have a violent crime, like domestic as an example, and I've seen it more than once, where it goes through and there is some legal little thing which causes the whole case to get thrown out.
Because of situations like this, where the court was at fault and it had nothing to do with law enforcement or the victim, we are left standing there with egg on our face because the victim trusted us and they were not able to get justice. That type of interaction between law enforcement and the legal system is sometimes really hard to deal with. I think it could break a lot of spirit in people who are trying to do the right thing.

Jen Lee
You work the night shift where domestic violence calls tend to be common. Can you share an intense experience during one of your shifts?

James
We responded to a welfare check, which is somebody calls in and asks us to check on somebody else because they're concerned. We ended up going to this place, and knock on the door; it was not a good setup. As police, you're always trained to be aware of your surroundings. This guy opens the door and doesn't just open the door, but throws the door open and jumps out at us. There was a 3 second conversation. In that 3 seconds, saw a small child and a female in the apartment. There was just way too much going on. And way too much not in the right context. Legally, we could be there.
After seeing the child, and I'm talking like six months old, and the female in the background, decided in that split second, to enter his apartment. We ended up getting into a fight with him and ended up having to tase him and arrest him on a welfare check when you're just wanting to show up to make sure someone is okay. We were going there to help somebody and you end up having to arrest them.

Jen Lee
On your calls do you go by yourself? Or do you have a partner?

James
Depending upon the call, if they're domestics, there's always two of us. Like your traffic stops and normal day to day routine stuff, I'll be by myself.

Jen Lee
Okay, I hate to ask this question, but it's the reality of your profession. Have you ever witnessed a fellow officer get injured or killed?

James
I am lucky enough that I have not had the experience that. I've seen lots of situations where it could have easily happened.

Jen Lee
What affects the morale of our officers? I know we kind of talked about your frustrations with the legal system at times. But what else do you think affects the morale of our officers?

James
Obviously community, how they view law enforcement can affect it. If you have a good chief like I do; morale is good.

If you have somebody that's micromanaging and basically trying to just protect themselves or the department from any legal action, that can be really destroying for morale.

Sheriff's Department is a bit more aware of that, partially because it's an elected position. They have to be aware more of the community which has its benefits and downfalls. They can't enforce some stuff because the community would get mad, which, you know, that's the community and that is what they're choosing to allow to be enforced.

It's an interesting thought that our laws are based upon a voluntary system. Basically, if the community doesn't want something enforced, you can't enforce it, to an extent. A prime example would be some of the marijuana laws which are going through the country right now. Federally they're illegal. But your states are basically saying don't enforce this and the federal government is, for the most part responding to that.

Jen Lee
How do our police officers overcome the overwhelming negative portrayal of our police officers via social media and our news outlets?

James
I try not to watch news or pay much attention to social media, which I think is a lot of law enforcement. There are a few on YouTube and stuff like that, they address it, talk about it and try to put a positive on it. And show what's really going on.

A lot of the media and news or just snippets of a situation. Unless you were in that situation, or have seen a very similar situation, you do not understand what's going on; the knowledge of the danger, the knowledge of past interactions. I think a lot of social media is easily dismissed on our side. Not that there's not validity of some of the statements.

Jen Lee
How do you try to change people's perception? Or do you just wake up every day saying that's not my job, I'm just gonna go out here and protect people?

James
So yeah, it's part of our job. But partially, it's not my job. That sounds like a cop out but it's not. I think, the only way you're going to change stuff like that is talking to people. Showing them that what they're seeing on the media isn't accurate. I have really good sergeants, really good fellow officers that genuinely care about the community.  And the community sees that. They're very, very pro police. A lot of places aren't.

I think the more a department tries to protect itself, and not be part of the community, that isolation from the community basically, hurts them more than they think. We have school resource officers who are very involved with the parents and stuff during the day. They see how we're trying to help them.

To judge the entire system by that one, isn't fair. I think people see that when you talk to them face to face, and you do the right things. While it might not get blasted on media or social media, it is more effective at changing minds and hearts than anything I can say, or do outside of that.

Jen Lee
99% of our law enforcement are good people dedicated to their communities focused on maintaining law and order, enforcing the law to keep its citizens safe. How do you avoid becoming the 1% statistic representing the bad apples?

James
Every law enforcement officer is basically presented with an opportunity to do something that might be easier, illegal, whatever. That's just the nature of our job. The mindset of a person who walks into a room, assesses a situation and says you are doing something wrong, I am going to either fine or arrest you and take away part of your freedoms, you have to be on moral high ground. I'm gonna say this and it sounds bad, but you have to be better than that person.

What keeps me from doing things that are, like stealing money, or stealing drugs, abusing the power, is the fact that I have to maintain myself better and be better than the people  I'm arresting. I'm not trying to talk down on them. It's just they are willing to do that; steal, lie, cheat. I'm not.

That is the biggest thing for law enforcement, because we were asked to be a neutral third party for the law, and the court systems. If you lose that, you're not of any use to anybody. So it's very much, "I have to be better. I am better." So it's a bit of an arrogance but it's not.

Jen Lee
Do you think that anti-violence plan begins with gun control? What are your thoughts if you had to implement a plan?

James
No, no, I don't think gun control as we think of it, is going to stop anything. Criminals, don't care about laws, obviously, criminals. The only thing that will stop violence is violence. That's never somewhere you want to go. But it is also sometimes the only way to stop it.

I think the bigger thing is, there's always going to be violence, there always has been. There always be perpetrators of violence. You always need somebody to intervene, which is what law enforcement does.

The only real way to affect change is education. As far as getting rid of violence in a society, it takes everybody. There has to be a hard line where the community says, no that is not acceptable! We have to use the resources we have to limit that. It gets complex because we have the Constitution, guaranteed right, etc.
We are seeing alot of stuff which falls under the mental health side. There's a good number of my calls that I go on, where it's going to be a mental health issue; mental health and alcohol or mental health and drugs or trying to self regulate. We've gotten better in the past 10 years even acknowledging the fact that there's some mental health.
 I don't like the trend where everything is defined as a mental health issue. A kid shoplifts and it's labeled "mental health," no, it's not a mental health issue, the kid just stole the candy bar, discipline him and deal with life.
There are mental health issues which need to be dealt with. If you deal with them early, you're not going to end up with it sliding into a violent crime and it allows for a greater chance of preventing it before they hurt themselves or others. It's a community having to open up their eyes and deal with it.

Jen Lee
I'm sure when people heard violence needs to be combated by violence. They were like, Oh my gosh!

James
I understand how needing violence to solve violence sounds. Take an intense situation where emotions are high, or there's a legal substance involved. For example a man running around with a shotgun. There isn't time to sit down and say, "Hey, what are your feelings, etc, etc." I'm not trying to be patronizing. at all because that is more than likely a mental issue. But at that point, he's a danger to somebody else.

There are also some people that don't, literally, just don't care about other people. I think if your situation. That man didn't care. Your well being wasn't even in his wheelhouse. Those situations are going to require a level of violence above what that person is willing to do to make them stop. I'm not saying it's right. not saying it's wrong, I'm just saying that's the reality of the situation. Basically, a conquering army going through, the only thing that stops them are bigger defending army. And if you don't at least acknowledge that as part of the conversation, then you're cheating yourself.

Jen Lee
Aside from knowing our law enforcement are here to protect us, homeowners are installing cameras etc around their house. Are they beneficial to law enforcement?

James
Your house gets broken into and you don't have a system, but your neighbor does. It directly faces your door, ypu can see the guy going in, etc, etc. If your neighbor decides that he doesn't want the police to have that information, we can't get it. Yeah, we can send a request for information. They're going to ignore it.

Jen Lee
So be nice to your neighbor.

James
Yes, definitely be nice to your neighbor. The biggest thing for me is how you live your life. Because, " oh, I got a camera watching this" and you're not staying aware. You're not mentally engaged to your surroundings, you're not seeing the fact that there's dude peddling drugs, two doors down, because there's cars going in there all night. Your system is only watching your front door.

Jen Lee
You make a good point of, always be aware of your surroundings, get to know your neighbors and your neighborhood.

I truly appreciate your time today. And I have one last question for you. How can the public who recognize the essential need for our law enforcement support you and safely influence the public opinion?

James
I think it gets back to a one on one actual discussion. And maybe social media is the catalyst for that? Talking to people and acknowledging their views and having that conversation. Supporting your local law enforcement. If there's a city commission meeting, show up and support them. Make sure your cops and local law enforcement have the equipment and money they need to do their job.

Jen Lee
If it's an elected position, go vote.

James
Very much so. Conversations you have with people around you, trying to influence via positive means and realizing that some people will never change their mind, which is fine. They can hate law enforcement all they want. That's their right and being respectful.

Jen Lee
Is there anything you want to add before I do my closing?

James
I think I'm pretty much good here.

Jen Lee
Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us today, James. Most importantly, thank you for all you do. And a big thanks to our law enforcement all over the United States who work to keep us safe day in and day out. Also, we give thanks to our firefighters, all of our first responders, our teachers, and everyone who contributes to the betterment of us, as human beings.
This is Jen Lee, the host of I Need Blue. Thank you for joining us today. You can hear all of the podcasts, subscribe, never miss an episode www.INeedBlue.net again, www.INeedBlue.net. I Need Blue can also be found on all of your favorite podcast platforms. Thank you so much.