
NEWS

No one said it'd be easy: St. Paul police chief reflects on tenure

By **FREDERICK MELO** | fmelo@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

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After her killing, John Harrington put a photo of 15-year-old Brittany Kekedakis in his wallet as a constant reminder of his responsibility to her and her family.

Harrington, the outgoing St. Paul police chief, has kept the picture there for more than three years, determined to find some closure by catching her killers. After a long silence, federal prosecutors recently charged two men in the March 2007 execution-style slaying of Kekedakis, her mother and her mother's boyfriend, brutal deaths that have haunted the city's top cop since that horrible day on Burgess Street.

It's bittersweet progress, but no one ever promised Harrington the work would be easy. Harrington, 54, steps down as chief today after one term at the helm of the state's third-largest law enforcement agency, wrapping up a policing career that has brought him face-to-face with the best and worst the city has to offer.

Harrington, a 33-year-veteran of the department, put on his first police badge in 1977 at age 21 when he began night-cop duties on the city's East Side. On Saturday night, he returned to those same familiar corners, not as chief but as patrolman, leaving the desk to revisit his past and complete his last night patrol.

Just after 9 p.m., he drove up and down McKnight Road, eyeing the sites of long-closed bars and clubs and car dealerships, many now empty lots and vacant buildings. He remembered with fond amusement the manufactured fog that rose up on Saturday nights to smother the floor of the old Rickshaw disco bar, the site of his first bad stabbing call. The building remains. The bar does not.

"Not all the changes have been good," Harrington said. "The East Side right now is an area where there's really some real work to be done."

By 10 p.m., he had moved on to join roll call with a group of officers at the Eastern District Station at Payne and Minnehaha avenues.

'PROFESSOR' A CATHOLIC, BUDDHIST

Several of the men around him, it's revealed in conversation, were born the same year he became an officer. He never planned to be here this long.

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“There’s only a couple people ahead of me on the seniority list,” Harrington tells the officers, sitting back and speaking with his usual casual, chatty assuredness. “I’ve had a good time every day, other than a couple of really awful days when really bad (stuff) happened.”

Sgt. John Peck bids him goodbye. “Thanks for being approachable, chief,” says Peck. “Some people you can talk to, and some people you can’t.”

Harrington seems to know what Peck means.

Nicknamed by some officers “the Professor” because of his multiple degrees, Harrington brought with him an interest in diversity and learning that supporters said went well beyond rhetoric.

A practicing Catholic and Zen Buddhist, he became the city’s second African-American police chief. And he was thought to be the only chief to hold a master’s degree and have completed work toward a doctorate.

Actually, make that two doctorates, both unfinished: the first in education at the University of Minnesota and the second in public administration at Hamline University. Harrington, who reads a book a week, said he’s already on the lookout for his next academic challenge.

The classroom, he knows, isn’t the first association most people make with cops.

“I came out of Dartmouth College and wanted to be a cop,” said Harrington, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago. “My mother was wrong — ‘anything but being a cop.’ Dad was a Cook County deputy for a few years, and he hated it. ... I liked it when he was a cop. He wasn’t so sure.”

SAVE LIVES WITH ‘INTEL’

When he was sworn in as chief in 2004, Harrington promised to make St. Paul police more “culturally competent.” The numbers of Latino and Hmong officers indeed grew during his tenure. And Harrington, who earned his bachelor’s degree in Far Eastern Religion with a minor in Chinese, began his term by taking classes in the Hmong language as a nod to the city’s growing community.

His Hmong, he admits, is terrible, but that hasn’t been his only frustration. Early on, he set a goal of making sure each incoming police academy was 40 percent female and people of color and 40 percent bilingual. The city hit those goals for four or five years running before the gains in diversity dropped off.

Other failures loomed just as large, most notably in retention. Not all his recruits made it through to graduation.

“We were losing folks on physical fitness, we were losing folks on some real serious job skills I wasn’t willing to cut corners on,” he said.

Now, it’s on to new challenges. In May, he confirmed he is running as a DFLer for the state Senate seat being vacated by Mee Moua. He’ll be one of 11 names on the Aug. 10 DFL primary ballot, but Harrington said he hasn’t so much as made a fundraising phone call, preferring instead to have a clean break between his policing duties and his campaigning.

In the meantime, his attention is on books.

His gift to his protégé, incoming St. Paul Police Chief Tom Smith, is a collection of essays, “Leadership Matters: Police Chiefs Talk About Their Careers.” A second copy will go to Paul Schnell, a longtime spokesman for the police department who soon will become police chief in Hastings.

If Harrington could write his own essay, it’d be this: The next prevailing approach in law enforcement should be “predictive policing” — cops using information gathered from the streets to predict where crime will occur and prevent it before it happens.

Could a pre-emptive approach save the life of a woman bearing telltale marks of escalating domestic abuse? Could it have saved Destiny Jackson, a St. Paul toddler beaten to death by her father in 2007 after police failed to get her removed from his custody for good?

Could it have saved Brittany Kekedakis?

Harrington says yes, yes and yes.

“I think that’s where policing needs to go,” he said. “We need to be a better consumer of all this intel.”

Frederick Melo can be reached at 651-228-2172.

Frederick Melo

Frederick Melo was once sued by a reader for \$2 million but kept on writing. He came to the Pioneer Press in 2005 and brings a testy East Coast attitude to St. Paul beat reporting. He spent nearly six years covering crime in the Dakota County courts before

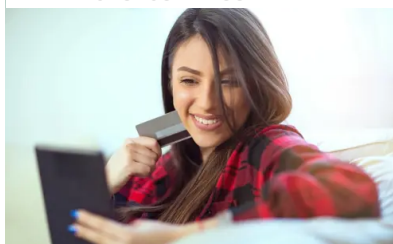
switching focus to the St. Paul mayor's office, city council, and all things neighborhood-related, from the city's churches to its parks and light rail. A resident of Hamline-Midway, he is married to a Frogtown woman. He Tweets with manic intensity at @FrederickMelo.

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