

Newly-appointed Chief Austin discusses future of Columbia Heights PD

Jack Hammett Dec 13, 2017

Columbia Heights Police Department Interim Police Chief Lenny Austin raised his hand Nov. 21 and swore an oath – thus replacing Scott Nadeau as the department's chief of police.

Austin began serving as interim chief in July and has worked in the department for more than 20 years. As a captain, Austin was responsible for day-to-day operations and was involved in operations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, the CHPD anti-bullying reading program and the Multicultural Advisory Committee.

In 2013, the Star Tribune featured Austin in an article on the city's police interacting with community members and reducing crime peacefully. He was pictured playing a game of Connect Four with a third-grader named Derrick West.

Now, in replacing Nadeau, Austin said he wants to continue the department's growing legacy of what he calls community policing.

"One thing about Nadeau is that he really brought in an important philosophy and really developed the department, bringing us into the concept of community policing," Austin said. "We really have benefited from that, and we'll continue down this road. The one thing we learned over the years was the importance of maintaining that partnership with the community."

Austin said Nadeau took the time to develop a leadership team in the police department.

"I think the biggest thing [under Nadeau's leadership] was community policing and problems orienting police," Austin said. "It sounds like it isn't a big deal, but trust me, from an organizational standpoint, it is."

Community policing is based on partnerships in the community, Austin said.

"We as a group can go out and solve problems and crime together," Austin said. "A lot of times, we have a good idea on what the crime and problem may be, but by getting out and talking with people in the neighborhoods, it really helps us shape our planning and strategies."

As for the future, Austin said, the department is looking forward to promotional processes involving captains and sergeants. The department will hire for additional vacancies as well.

"The other thing we're in the middle of," Austin said, "is strategic planning for 2018. With that, we go out and meet stakeholders to help us shape our strategic plan. We'll be working on that in December. The other thing is emphasis on de-escalation and crisis intervention-not just reducing crises but use-of-force incidents in general."

Austin explained that de-escalation is currently a national topic and involves communication.

"De-escalation is something that we've been trained on over the years, but we're emphasizing the importance of communication skills to try to bring high-stress incidents down," he said. "We try to do everything we can to bring a person down from a crisis without using force or even using a minimal amount of force."

"Crisis intervention is situations where people are in crises or mental illness crises. The tools and techniques we learn in training are useful and practical in any type of conflict or situation where someone is having problems. It doesn't necessarily have to be a mental illness crisis."

Austin said the department prides itself on its problem-solving capabilities.

"We look forward to continue doing that for Columbia Heights and the citizens we serve," he said.

On being sworn in, Austin said there was no guarantee he would receive the Chief of Police position just because he was appointed interim chief earlier in the year.

“Being appointed interim chief gave the council and city leadership direction to decide on how they wanted to proceed,” he said. “It’s been truly an honor and it’s been humbling. It’s a big responsibility and one you can’t take lightly. I’ve been very fortunate to be surrounded by a good department and good community members and city leaders.”

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