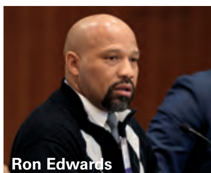
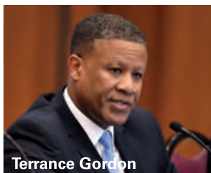
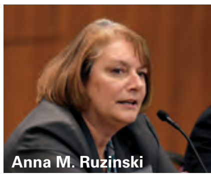
BEHIND THE BADGE:

A Growing Sense of the Need in Law Enforcement to Cope with Trauma

Marquette Law School's Restorative Justice Initiative conference, on November 9, 2018, was titled "The Power of Restorative Justice in Healing Trauma in Our Community" and was introduced by an original, one-hour film featuring law enforcement and community members discussing trauma in their lives and their efforts to overcome or address it. One of the panels then examined an issue that traditionally has received little attention: the impact on law enforcement officers of dealing with a nearly constant stream of severe and painful human episodes and needs and the growing efforts to help officers who develop signs of trauma as a result of dealing with many other people's traumas.


Ron Edwards


Terrance Gordon


Anna M. Ruzinski

T. J. Smith

This panel discussion, titled "Trauma Through a Law Enforcement Lens," included four veterans of law enforcement:

Ron Edwards, a Milwaukee police officer

Terrance Gordon, chief inspector of the Milwaukee Police Department

Anna M. Ruzinski, chief of police in the Milwaukee suburb of Menomonee Falls and formerly a high-ranking officer with the Milwaukee Police Department

T. J. Smith, former chief of communications for the Baltimore Police Department

Rita Aleman, program manager for the Law School's Lubar Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education, moderated the session. This is an edited and excerpted transcript of the discussion. The full conference, including the film and the other panel discussions, is available on the Law School's website.

Aleman: You told me after you watched the film that it was the first time that you started to process the trauma you had witnessed yourself or experienced yourself as a police officer. Can you talk about the trauma you've experienced as an officer and as a chief?

Ruzinski: I've been in law enforcement for 38 years. So, as you can imagine, working the streets of Milwaukee and in mostly impoverished areas, I saw a lot. I was asked this morning whether I have ever been a victim, whether I have ever experienced trauma. The only thing I could really think of was in the 1960s, when there were the riots in Milwaukee and my dad was a police officer. We'd hear on the news how many officers were injured, and we wouldn't see him walk through that door at 11 o'clock every night like he was supposed to, and we would wonder: "Is he one of the ones who've been killed or injured?" And then I thought of my career as a police officer, and I thought of things I've seen that I never thought of processing.

One of the first crimes I ever investigated was a situation of domestic violence. My partner and I went to the residence, and we knocked on the door.

We could hear screaming and yelling inside, and just before we kicked the door down, the woman on the other side opened it. Well, she was six months pregnant, and her boyfriend was burning her belly with a hot iron. He was taking a hanger and trying to gouge her stomach. So, we were able to make the arrest; we were able to get her care. But then it comes time to go to court. Well, you can imagine, there's some time in the criminal justice system before that case goes to court. By that time, she had had the baby, she was back in love with him, and they were together, and she was cussing me out for arresting him to begin with. And I couldn't comprehend why someone would go back to that type of atmosphere.

So there are things like that through my career that I've experienced. I never really considered them trauma or things that affected me because, as law enforcement, we're the tough guys, right? Even as a female, you know, I'm supposed to be the macho one. We just put it all away, and we don't think about it. Our training kicks in, we're there to go in and handle a situation and take care of it. We never stop to think of the effect it has on us. . . . In law enforcement, we're so busy taking care of the laws and preserving the peace and helping the public that we never seem to think about where it all started, and that's what we're starting to do now. We're finally getting to a point where we need to work as a community, we need to start at the beginning, we need to start with young kids, we need to start with mental health, we need to start with a family unit, and if we can start to fix some of those things on the front end, then we're not going to be dealing with some of the people in the criminal justice system later on in their lives.

Gordon: We had a former [Milwaukee] chief who said that apparently there's no ill in the world that can't be solved by more training for the police. It was a different context, but that's partially true: Training is extremely important. And in the context of trauma, when you talk about training, obviously, if your police officers aren't experts in victims and victimization, I don't know who else in the criminal justice system should be. We have contact with more victims than anybody else in any segment of society—even than prosecutors.

So when you talk about trauma and training for the police, it's extremely important to approach it from both sides: victims, which there's no shortage of for us, and then the person who is the police officer. And we have a very comprehensive approach. You wouldn't know it because we're not very good at marketing what we do in law enforcement, except what you see on the body cameras, and we don't always want you to see that. But we have a very comprehensive approach in Milwaukee and in a lot of police departments now. A lot of people don't know about it, but we are seeing the results, believe it or not. It started a long time ago, in the '80s, with peer support. I've been a member of the peer-support team for 20 years. This team still has a very special place in our department,

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even though we have some more-institutionalized things now. We're beginning to implement some aspects of trauma-informed care, particularly in our districts where we see the highest volume of violent crime, and particularly where our work involves juveniles. We're focusing on the person; we're asking our officers to focus on the self. Right now, we're in the middle of a very large and hopefully impactful study on resilience.

We have an early-intervention program that has been around for a few years now and is getting more robust. In this early-intervention program, information about officers is put into a system. When an officer amasses a certain number of events—of certain types of events—there's a trigger, and then it's mandatory at that point that a supervisor has an intervention—not disciplinary—with that person. One of the things I'm most proud of is that I implemented a wellness coordinator and got a police psychologist on our police department staff. She has been extremely well received.

Aleman: Ron, you faced the deaths of two of your brothers and then your dad, and you still reported for work. Can you describe for us what that period of time was like for you and what kind of supports you actually needed from your colleagues?

Edwards: The first death to occur was my brother—my baby brother, Mario—where he died in police custody. So, the police actually knew what happened, but family members did not.

It hit home when my cousin called me a sellout, because I'm going to be working with a bunch of people who just killed my brother. Other family members said, "Don't worry about him; don't pay any attention to him." So, I kind of brushed it off and kept moving forward.

Moving forward, I'm a full-blown police officer, working. I was on an off day, and we get the call from my mom to get over there. She's long-faced, my father's long-faced, and they say they have something to tell me about our brother in Atlanta. He died. But then they tell me that it was by a police officer in the city of Atlanta. So now this is the second time.

This has to sink in with me because now I'm a police officer and I'm working for a police department, and I'm having doubts. Maybe my cousin was right; maybe I'm in the wrong field; and why is this all happening to me? Why, why, why? My dad pulled me aside because he knew I was having a hard time; that was probably, I would say, the most sincere conversation that we had ever had. He told me: You have to remember how hard you worked to get this job, the things you went through to get it, and why you are there doing it. That kept me wanting to move forward.

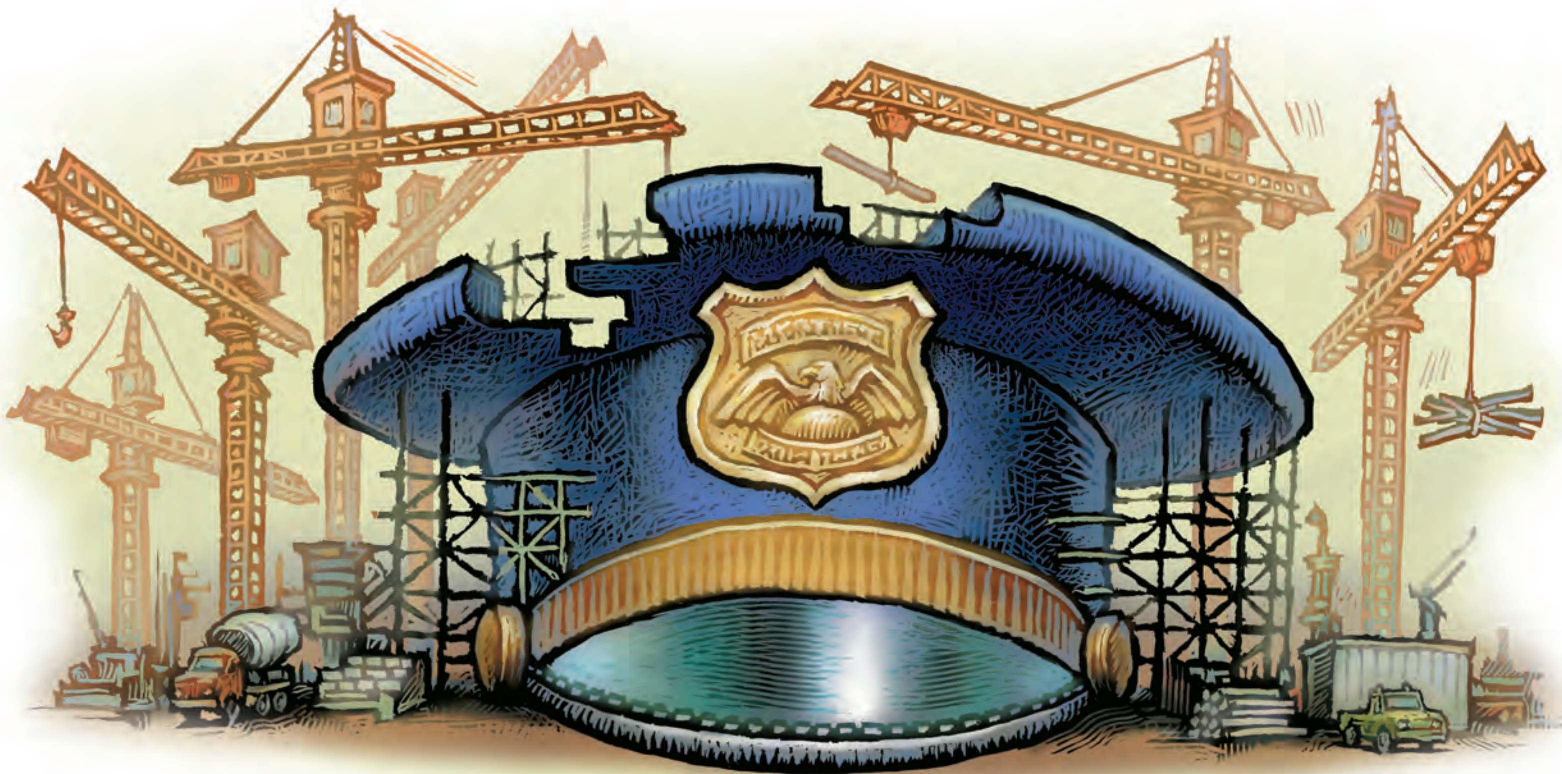
Moving forward: A year later, before the young man who committed the act against my brother could even go to trial, I lost my dad. As he was coming home, parking his truck in the garage that was off the alley, [he was murdered]. That's when everything really hit and sunk in on me—like, what am I supposed to do? My wife, my family—they really helped me pull through things. And then at work, as far as peers—they really helped me pull through. So, between having family members and peers like I had at work—those are the reasons why I'm still able to cope, talk about, and deal with the issues that I've gone through.

Smith: In Baltimore, we started talking about post-traumatic stress disorder among the community and the police officers, going through a riot. At the time that this occurred, this was something that hadn't been seen in the city in more than 40 years, and we have these officers who are being put in these volatile situations. And, obviously, many of us are ill-equipped. We all probably came up in our career where our mental health was secondary. Under the twenty-first-century policing model, officer wellness is a pillar, no different from crime fighting. And that's critically important because we're being thrust into these atmospheres and these environments.

We're ill-equipped to handle a lot. We're getting better—our profession is getting much better.

We're just all so ill-equipped to deal with [trauma within the police department], but we have started, at least in Baltimore and, I hear, here in Milwaukee. It's like we're brother/sister cities with a lot of the same things. Wellness programs—we've even got a wellness dog now. We joke about it, but the dog makes you feel better. Something as simple as that fluffy creature coming around makes you feel better. But five years ago, even in many cities, that would have been taboo.

Ruzinski: What we're trying to say is, as law enforcement, we're human, just like everybody else. There is no police officer in this world who wakes up and says, "I think I'm going to use excessive force today. I think I'm going to go out and shoot someone today." I guess what I'm saying by that is this: We are wired to help people and protect people, and when we don't take care of our own



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and they experience that trauma within their life, it could be our not addressing that trauma and the wellness of that officer that causes him to act out and become a bad officer later on. And that's on us.

We're just getting into officer wellness. There are three times the number of officers committing suicide every year as are killed in the line of duty. I had an officer commit suicide, an officer who worked for me, and we all wondered, "Why didn't we see it? What could we have done? What didn't we see?" So the kind of trauma that [non-officers] can experience and may cause them to act out or commit a crime could be the very same type of trauma that police officers experience from all the trauma that they see and may cause them to act out. We need to educate our officers; we need to have them understand that what they experience can affect the way they do their job. We need to watch out for them so that they can continue to watch out for the citizens.

Gordon: For a very, very long time now—in policing, that's like five or six years, because things come and go so fast, but for a while—we have been actively working on reducing the stigma of needing and asking for help. What we Gen Xers have done very poorly is that we spoiled the heck out of Millennials. However, what we've done very well is let them know that it's okay to say, "I'm drowning—please help me." What we're also doing is—one of my favorite phrases is—to rat them out. I'm not talking about ratting people out for chewing gum in uniform. But if you see somebody struggling, tell somebody, go to a boss. If your boss can't handle it—well, first of all, I need to take the stripes off that person's arm. But if your boss can't handle it, you go to another boss and another boss, and, finally, if you can't find somebody, you call me.

Ruzinski: In recent years in law enforcement, we've really had to do a paradigm shift. Our approach was "get into a situation, solve it as fast as you can." And 20 minutes to a half hour was thought to be way too long: the sergeant would be on your rear end, "What's taking you so long?" But then we did this thing called crisis-intervention training. I am a firm believer in it. I started it back in the Milwaukee Police Department, when I was there as a deputy inspector, before I retired from the force. I quickly picked up that charge in Waukesha County when I got out there. I'm happy to say that I have the only police department in Waukesha County—or it's probably sad to say—that has been entirely crisis-intervention-trained. And when I say we had to do a paradigm shift, this meant that when police officers go into a situation where they are dealing with traumatized victims—be it someone in a mental-health crisis or the victim of a crime—the officers are to take as much time as they need to mediate that situation, to communicate with that person, to use active-listening skills, to really find out what it is that that victim or that person in mental crisis needs. They don't need to get in a scuffle; they don't need to arrest a person who's in

mental crisis because he's committed a disorderly conduct. They need to know and understand that that person needs services, whether it's getting back on meds, getting a counselor, or getting a safety plan with the family. They need to look at it from that angle. What that does is to reduce the amount of use-of-force situations that we have because those officers are actively listening to those victims, to those people in crisis, and getting them the help they need, as opposed to sticking them into the criminal justice system. We need to continue to move in that direction as law enforcement.

Smith: Our profession is progressing; policing is progressing. Unfortunately, it's taken a long time, it's taken crises, and it's taken incidents. None of us, I can say with certainty, came up in a police-academy environment that focused on the mental health aspects and the crises that people were going through. But officers today are coming up in that environment. One of the things that have been mentioned is the time that you take on a call. We're these paramilitary structures. It might be time in modern policing to go away from [the thinking that] we're kind of marching into an environment and we're the strong people who aren't really concerned about your mental well-being. Because you can have an officer who's one year on the street, who is engaged in a productive dialogue with the person going through the crisis, and that officer doesn't need to yield his or her authority to the corporal or the sergeant or the lieutenant; rather, that officer has the rapport.

Gordon: I completely agree with T. J. [Smith] and with Chief Ruzinski. Our profession is changing. I remember, before the unrest all over the country, I was having a discussion with a researcher, and I said, "Policing is entering this golden age of training right now. We're been inviting people into our academies and participating in research." And then the wheels came off, because there is so much video out there. The profession was forced to look at itself in a way that we hadn't before. And we grew up saying, "Oh, that's just an isolated event; that's just an isolated event. Oh, that other one—that's just an isolated event." We're at a point now where we've had to say, "Well, this sure is happening a lot." We can't really say it's isolated anymore. What are we going to do about it? The transparency—it's getting much better. You won't find a profession that does as much policing of itself, believe it or not, as police departments, and we discipline ourselves much more harshly than you'll find in the private sector. If there's a bad cop, we want him gone.

Aleman: Can you talk a little bit about the training, about implicit bias, and about the efforts to try to prevent the shootings that may happen as a result of implicit bias?

Gordon: I'm a student of psychology. I just love the implicit-bias training. A lot of established police officers don't buy into it because their take is that they're being told that they're racist. And that's not it. It's just that every person has bias—every person does. And then the thought is, well, you can't do anything about that if everybody has it. Of course, there are things that you can do. And I like it because, if you accept the training, it allows you to realize that there are things you can do to overcome your bias and that affect your decision making. I heard Jesse Jackson say one day as he was illustrating this point—not realizing that he was helping me with training, but as he was illustrating this point, he said—"I heard footsteps behind me, I turned around and looked, and I was relieved to see that it was a white kid." The black dash crime association—the black–crime association—exists in most Americans, particularly in urban areas, including black people, black police officers. So I like the training.

Ruzinski: The hardest part for me was to come from working in Milwaukee to now being the chief of a suburban department. And I can tell you that a lot of education has to be done on the suburban side. Because I can tell you as a matter of fact that 85 percent of the offenders who come into Menomonee Falls are from Milwaukee. I can tell you that a great percentage of them are African American, not all of them. But now you take people who are in the suburbs to begin with because they moved out of the big, bad city, who get their car broken into once, and, my God, they're ready to move. So we have to do a lot of education in the community. We have some officers who have grown up their entire time in the suburbs and have only been on a suburban department. And then we have our officers who have left Milwaukee and have come to join our department, and they tell those officers, "You have no clue." So, we have to do a lot of education in regard to that implicit bias. I think our officers have come a long way. I think the younger officers are certainly more tolerant than some of the older officers. ■