

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays in the background as Katie speaks.]

Katie Axelson: Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel. When we travel, we get to know people who are different than we are. We hear different perspectives, and we better understand others' stories. We learn to stand with people instead of having opinions on issues. I'm your host Katie Axelson. This week we're hearing the perspective from Stephanie Freethy who was a police officer for thirteen years. Content warning: we're going to talk about police brutality, we're going to talk about toxic work environments, we're going to talk about problems that exist within at least one specific police force in the United States. There will be descriptions of microaggressions. If this episode isn't a good fit for you right now, that's okay! Maybe check out Episode {71} where Mabel Ninan shares her story about being a Christian from India, or Episode {81} where Keith Menhinick talks about sexuality within the church. In hearing Stephanie's story, my heart aches for the police officers and the impossible situations they experience - both in the community and in their own internal work environments. I understand a little bit more why the world – okay, the United States– is in the inexcusable situation that it's in. Have Hope; Will Travel condemns racism in all of its forms. We stand against police brutality and we stand with people, regardless of the color of their skin or the uniform that they wear. We're here to have honest conversations, not just opinions. We're here to learn, we're here to challenge, we're here to grow. If anything, I hope this episode helps you understand how much hard work there is to be done to make the United States a safer place for everyone.

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays, and fades out as Katie begins to speak.]

Katie Axelson: Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel. I'm your host Katie Axelson. Today I'm here with a new friend Stephanie Freethy. Stephanie and I met through a podcasting group that we are both part of. She was a police officer for thirteen years, now she's a life coach helping women figure out who they are, what they want, and how to go after it. Stephanie, welcome to the show.

Stephanie: Thank you so much, I'm excited to be here.

KA: I'm excited to be here as well, and I'm excited to get to hear your perspective because I know the police officer voice is one that we had not represented yet. And I live in Minneapolis so it's a little controversial here as well. So I'm excited to get to hear your thoughts.

SF: Yeah I'm excited. And I'm in Houston so definitely a lot happens here as well with the police department. So we've got lots to talk about.

KA: Wonderful, it's going to be a great conversation! [Stephanie laughs.] So let's start with: what is your preferred language? Is it "police officer" - obviously you're not a man so I'm imagining it's not "policeman." Cop? Like, what are your thoughts on the words.

SF: I've never heard like any other officer have a perspective on it so. So I remember being in the academy, and a female officer came in and told us "Don't say the word cop, it's derogatory." And all of us were just kind of looking at each other, like we had never heard that before. And since then, I've never heard anything about it. So police officer, policeman, police woman, cop - like as far as I know, all of it's fine.

KA: Okay cool, that's good to know. I had heard that cop was derogatory as well, but I guess we don't know the evidence to back that up.

SF: Yeah I actually Googled it because I thought about it and I Googled it and it actually goes way back to – I don't know if it was England or something like that – and it was actually C.O.P. stood for something. Like I don't remember if it was Constables On Patrol or something like that and even from that I was like, "I still don't understand how this could be derogatory," so I don't think it's an issue. I've never heard an officer have a problem being called a cop.

KA: Awesome, well we're learning things already. Thank you.

SF: Yeah! [Stephanie laughs.]

KA: What made you decide to become a police officer?

SF: All right. Complete honesty: The X-Files. [Stephanie laughs.]

KA: Love it!

SF: Yes. And this is even more interesting is: I've never ever, in a million years, wanted to be a police officer. I just wanted to be a profiler for the FBI. And thank you Hollywood for making me think that that would be super simple because I actually grew up in a very, very small town. The population was a thousand. We had two officers, one worked day shift, one worked night shift. And all they did, all day long, is write speeding tickets because I mean, in a really small town not a lot happens and that was like, I guess, a big source of revenue for the town. So I have this perception that that's what a police officer was, that they just sat around all day and wrote speeding tickets. And I was like, "I don't want to do that with my life!" So I always just had this dream from like the sixth grade on that I wanted to be an FBI agent. And it wasn't until I actually got into college that I realized I didn't have any of the qualifications to just go into the FBI. Like, I don't know what the qualifications are now but at the time there were five. And it was like, you had to be really good with computers, you had to speak of foreign language that was needed at the time, so not just any foreign language. I don't remember the other two, and then the final one was five years in law enforcement which is the only thing that I would qualify for, but I didn't even have law enforcement experience. So I was like, "Okay I guess that's out the window." And then as things unfolded over the years, I ended up applying for the Secret Service because the FBI was not hiring but the Secret Service was. So I was going through that process and I graduated and I needed a job, and so the Secret Service hiring process took months and I needed a job so somebody was like, "Look just go be a police officer, get the experience and then go to the Secret Service." So in the process I was - I got into the academy, and then I just ended up deciding that Secret Service wasn't what I wanted. So I ended up a police officer for thirteen years! [Stephanie and Katie laugh.] And never went Federal so I guess life just took me where I wanted it. But once I got into the academy and I saw all the different avenues that I could take from patrol, I was like, "Okay the options are endless and I can do anything." So then I was okay with it because now I actually knew police officers do more than just write speaking tickets. So it was just my small town perspective that was holding me back.

KA: Sure, sure. I know that police officers do more than write speeding tickets but what are some of those endless options that exist?

SF: So the interesting thing is that Patrol is actually probably the most exciting part.

KA: Okay.

SF: Because we're always first on the scene, you know. We actually get to arrest the bad guys and we're the ones that are finding evidence and finding guns and finding drugs and tagging the drugs. And we are hands on, like I could show up in a scene and it could be a homicide. Or I could show up on a scene that's domestic violence or just anything. So we're first on the scene and it can actually be exciting sometimes. It's nothing like TV – I'm sure we'll get into that – absolutely nothing like TV, but that's what's so great about patrol: is that every single day is different and you never know what you're going to get into or if you're not going to get into anything. But from there, within our Department we actually had to apply to go to other divisions. We call them Concern Divisions, so like the Homicide Division or Burglary and Theft, Robbery. We had to apply for them like it was a job and so that's where you could start taking different avenues as I want to go work for the Robbery Department, or Homicide, or I want to go work for Motorcycles, we had a solo Department. Or go fly the helicopters. So that's when you can kind of start branching out and you can go from one to the next to the next. Like some people work thirty years and have worked for like ten different Concern Divisions, so there's really a lot of options in a big Department.

KA: Huh. Things that I never would have thought about!

SF: Yeah me neither, until I got into it.

KA: Right. So what made you decide to leave the force?

SF: Oh. [Stephanie and Katie laugh.] So this is a story I've been trying to figure out how to tell, and I don't know - I can't even figure out, do I want to just come up with a version to say it briefly or do I want to come up with a version to tell people where they'll understand and believe me. It's kinda one of those things that's just all over the place. And there's a lot to the story, so I think I'll - I'll do the best I can with not dragging it out. So it ended up happening - so the George Floyd funeral was in Houston, I believe it was the month of May. So there were a lot of protests, there was a lot going on, we had the entire Department working on it. And then a few months later in October, there was like an inside joke with me and three other officers. It was not offensive, violating no policies, it was absolutely nothing. It was completely innocent. And my supervisor came across it and decided, "Well you know what, this could be racially insensitive." And we were like, "What are you talking about?" Like, "This is nothing!" And so he decided to file a report. So it wasn't official complaint, there wasn't even a complainant. He just decided, "I'm going to file this report and report it to the Department." And we were just like - we're in panic mode. Because of everything that's going on, we're going: this was completely innocent. Nothing offensive, racial, nothing about it. But we know the climate of our Department and what is going on within our Department. And I told him, because I was the only supervisor involved and it was three of my officers, and I told my Lieutenant, I said, "We could lose our jobs over this." Even though we didn't do anything wrong. And it had nothing to do with what's going on outside of the Department, it was the culture within the Department. And so I ended up getting

relieved of duty for five months while the investigation was going on. Our Internal Affairs Department investigated it and found nothing happened. There was nothing racial about it, there wasn't a complainant. No one was offended. Nothing happened. But because of the climate in the community with everything that had been going on, they decided, "Well we know nothing happened, but if word about this were to get to the community and we didn't do anything about it it would make us look bad."

KA: Wow.

SF: So they ended up citing us for things that had nothing to do with the complaint. Like they went on a fishing expedition. Like one of the things they decided to cite me with was because I was a supervisor and there was horse play in the office, and I didn't put a stop to it, they were going to cite me for it.

KA: gosh.

SF: And it's just like "Have you been in our office?" Our Commander has been in our office! There's a basketball goal, there's - we're police officers! There's a Nerf gun that shoots foam darts, I mean like, there's little lego policeman around, like. So when I realized I was going to sit down in a meeting with the chief and based on what I know from within our Department, I was going to be sitting there begging for my job when I didn't do anything wrong. And my officers did the same. And I was just like, "I'm not doing this." I've been putting up with the internal politics and the very, very toxic culture within our Department for thirteen years. I'm not - I'm not going to sit there and beg you for my job -

KA: Sure.

SF: - when I didn't do anything wrong and I stood up for my officers because that's what was right. My job as a supervisor is to make sure that my officers not only have everything they need to do their job, but that I protect them as well.

KA: Yeah.

SF: And when this all first started, I told my lieutenant, I stood up to him because I was like, "MY officers have done nothing wrong." And that ended up coming back on me, which I don't regret. I don't. Because I did what was right, which is very unheard of within the department. So I decided to resign. I wasn't forced to resign, I wasn't given any options because I decided not even to go into the meeting with the chief. Once they told me that things that they were going to cite me with that had nothing to do with the original complaint and I realized how petty it was, I was like, "What you want is you want for me to come in and you want for me to beg my job, to beg for my job. You want me to say I did something wrong and apologize for it. And I didn't, and I'm not going to reduce myself to that." So I just said, "I'll resign, it's fine." The three officers underneath me all - I was in, I was also fortunate that I was in a position where I could resign.

KA: Right.

SF: The officers under me have wives, they have children, they have kids in college. They were all given days off, unpaid. And they had done nothing wrong. But it was all so the Department

could save face with the community and say, "Oh you know, we found something wrong and we punish them. The Department did something." But it's just like, we didn't do anything wrong.

KA: Sure.

SF: So I think that's a point of view that unless you're in the Department or work for the Department you just don't understand just how toxic it is for us. Every single day we go to work knowing that we are nothing but a number and all we have to do is upset the wrong person and we could be out of a job. Simply because they decide they don't like us and they have the power to do it. Because it happens every single day in our Department. And it's really sad because we already face enough on the street, but our biggest threat is ourselves within our Department.

KA: Yeah, I was going to ask for clarity but I think you already did it like - the upsetting someone is someone that you work with, like a coworker. We're not talking about the general public, we're talking about a coworker.

SF: Yeah, yeah like the person that we upset was my lieutenant. You know?

KA: Tell us a little bit more about how race plays into the Department life.

SF: Umm, lots and lots of different ways. For one, let's just - okay we'll start with like, our upper rank, like our assistant chiefs. We have, I don't even know how many, like ten assistant chiefs or something like that. And positions are filled kind of like, "Well we can't have all white men. We have to have-" We always have an Asian, we always have a Hispanic, we always have at least one Black. For many years there was a lesbian. It's kind of like, "We realize this heterosexual white male over here may be the most qualified in the entire Department for the position, but we don't have a Black person." So they fill it with a Black person. And that rubs a lot of people the wrong way. Because like, on one hand we have the argument of everyone needs to be represented. Absolutely. But if you're not qualified for the position and assistant chiefs are way at the top. They are running huge segments of the Department. If you have zero experience with running that section of the Department and you're not qualified, should we put you in that position just because you fill a certain - you know, you check a box? And unfortunately that's kind of what it's reduced to is, "Oh we have this box that we need to check."

KA: Sure

SF: So it's unfortunate that we can't figure out that balance of making sure everyone is represented but at the same time having the most qualified people representing and running our departments. There are many, many white males that are assistant chiefs and end up retiring because in their mind they will never be a chief because they're white males.

KA: Interesting.

SF: Now can we prove this factually? No. But it's kind of one of those just understood things, that we have plenty of white males that are totally qualified to be chief but they just accept, "this is never going to happen for me," and they retire.

KA: Sure.

SF: So that's kind of one of those things. And since I - when I was on the Department, we had a Black chief, following him was a Black chief, following him was Hispanic, and following him was a Black chief. And some of them were good, some of them were not. Some of them were from within the Department, some of them were from outside the Department so it's not to necessarily say like, we never had anyone qualified in the possession. But was there someone more qualified that just happened to be a white male? Like he can't help that he was born that way. [Stephanie laughs.] You know? But - so that's one way that race kind of plays in with. I feel like it's a crutch in a way, that we don't have the most qualified people running the Department and it kind of runs downhill where we have things starting to fall apart.

KA: Sure.

SF: Another way is, this is something I experienced when I was in patrol. So this was ten years ago, this was before a lot of the police related deaths in the nation started happening and that sort of thing. And I was in patrol, I'm out of the Academy, I have like two years in, and I kind of start to recognize - I'm sure we'll get to the culture within the department.

KA: Yeah.

SF: But I kind of start to recognize that there are some officers that are just super lazy and don't work. And then there's of course us young rookies who are still super excited, and we're not only doing our work but we're picking up the slack. And so I remember going to one of my supervisors, and he is a Korean male. And I only say that because I think that kind of - it's not like I went to a white male. You know that may matter. But he was a Korean male, and I went to him and I said, "This officer is lazy. He does nothing all day. Everybody knows he does nothing all day." And my, the supervisor patted me on the knee, and he said, "One day when you're a sergeant, you'll understand." And I was just like, "No I won't." Because - and what he was getting at was that the officer I was complaining about was Black. And there was kind of another thing that was understood was that no one, none of the supervisors were willing to file complaints on the Black officers because they were afraid that the officers would say, "Oh they're being racist." And I'm not saying this as a general thing! Like, I absolutely hate generalizations because we have great Black officers and great Hispanic officers, and everything else. But it just kind of feeds into the culture of "We have a problem officer that we can prove is a problem officer. He's not doing his job. But you are not willing to file a complaint because you're afraid he's going to retaliate based off of race." Rather than like, "Can we just look at the facts here?" Regardless of race, regardless of gender, regardless of anything: he's not doing his job. Why aren't we doing something about it? And so that's another way that it kind of plays in and - I hate that I keep talking about Black versus white because there's a lot of other races with problems and that sort of thing, but unfortunately that's just been my personal experience is you know, in that circumstance. But that's why I said, the supervisor I talked to was a Korean male, because I was just like, I wouldn't think that there would be a concern there. I think because I'm white and they're Black, we worry about that conflict. But I guess I didn't see why a Korean would be worried about someone saying, "Oh he's being racist," because he's not a white male. But it's a perspective I'll never understand. One more thing I can think about is when I was in patrol, I was really good friends with a Black officer. And I'm not afraid to ask questions you know? Ten years ago I wasn't afraid to ask questions to understand. And I asked

him one day, I was like – ‘cause we worked in a primarily Black neighborhood – and I said, “What is it like for you? Do they like, expect you to give them special treatment or let them off or whatever?” And he said, “Oh no, we are traitors.” And I was shocked by this. and he said, “Oh yeah we are seen as traitors, we've gone to the other side. Like it's horrible for us.” And I was like, “I had no idea.”

KA: Right.

SF: I wouldn't have thought that. And so, you know, it's just another perspective that we don't know and we don't see unless we ask and seek to understand. But within the Department even though we have all different races and ethnicities represented, the primary clash seems to see seems to be between Black and white

KA: Interesting.

SF: yeah.

KA: Did you experience that clash being a woman in a male-dominated field?

SF: Well I am a white woman, so I can't really speak from that perspective. And many of the women that I worked with were white women. I can remember patrolling with one Black woman but we didn't have a relationship where we spoke openly like that.

KA: Yeah.

SF: I do know that just as a woman, there was one section of our beat that was like a Middle Eastern section. And as women, even though we were officers they wouldn't listen to us. We were completely - I mean not only would they not listen to us, they would completely disrespectful. Like would disregard us, wanted nothing to do with us, like we would have to call a male officer to the scene to communicate with the men because it - based on their culture they just wouldn't they wouldn't even deal with the female officers. So that was a little, a little challenging because it's one of those things where you have to, you have to understand and accept the culture over taking it personal and getting offended. Which back then, in my immaturity and my lack of patience, I would get offended by it.

KA: Sure.

SF: But now I've learned, you know that's just - I can't take it personal. I have to understand that that's their culture and this isn't really my problem, you know. If they don't want to accept me, that's their problem, there's nothing I can do about it. I've just got to, you know, separate myself from it and not take it personally.

KA: Sure. Wow. So my biggest takeaway from what I've heard you say is just how deeply broken the police system is. And I've known that, but I've never heard like, the inside perspective and I think it just expanded my realization of like, “Okay, this is a problem.” Do you know like historically, has it always been this type of a problem? Or is this a relatively new thing?

SF: I think absolutely it's historically been a problem and I think that it evolves with time. For example, we have the good old boy system within the Department. That is still alive and well in the Department. But I knew that you were going to ask me kind of about the female perspective,

and I've really been taking some time to think about this because I've never identified as a feminist. Part of that is my own ignorance that I don't fully understand what it means to be a feminist. But I was looking back at my history and I was like, "Okay well, where have I been? Who have I worked for?" And I primarily worked for women.

KA: Interesting.

SF: And with women! So that whole conflict with men hasn't been a problem and then I get into the police department. And once again it's really not evident simply because the good old boy system is not just passing over females, it's also passing over males. Because the good old boy system is about choosing your friend instead of the most qualified person for the position. So when I talked about going into Concern Divisions and it's like a job interview, well yes they have their certain questions that they ask and they have their little checklist and they score you and everything else. But at the end of the day, if you don't choose your buddy, you're going to get crap about it.

KA: Sure.

SF: So it doesn't matter if your buddy is completely unqualified and you have five people over here that are totally qualified. A lot of times there's that peer pressure, "I have to choose them otherwise I'm a crappy friend or I'm a crappy guy," or you know, their good old boy system. So that's another way I didn't experience something specifically about being a female, because many men were getting passed over as well. And when I was straight out of the academy, Hurricane Ike hit. And so we were on like, full mobilization. And I was still on probation, so out of the Academy. We're six months in the academy and six months on the street probation. So we have to ride with another officer. Because I was brand new I didn't really have anyone to ride with so they placed me with a woman. I didn't know her, I'm not thinking anything of it. And I find out later from a friend of mine that the woman's a lesbian. Doesn't matter, could care less and I was just like, "Okay." And he's like, "Well all of the older officers now think that you are a lesbian." And I was like, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "Well you're not sleeping with everyone and then you rode with her during the hurricane. So they all think that you're a lesbian." And I'm just like, "This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." It's like - it's like, okay I'm not sleeping with everyone. [Stephanie laughs.] If I was sleeping with everyone it would be a terrible thing. I'm not sleeping with everyone. So you still turn it into something that it's not. Being a lesbian, totally nothing wrong with it. But it's just the - their ignorance of like, if it's not one it's, why isn't this female sleeping with everybody? I don't know, maybe because I have some self-respect! [Katie laughs.]

KA: What a concept!

SF: Yeah! I mean have you ever heard of it? And that kind of - you know that's part of the good old boy's system. There's - and as women, we end up hurting ourselves as well. Because there are females within the Department who do sleep around and get their reputation of, "Oh well she just got that position because she's sleeping with whoever." Whether it's true or not, that's just another one of those things that feeds into the toxic culture of, you know you can't just look at someone as an individual. Regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation. We can't just look at that person and see their qualifications and be like, "This is the person we want for the job."



Instead we're so influenced by the culture and peer pressure and everything else going on that it's just so broken. So broken.

KA: Yeah. Is there hope for fixing it? What do we do from here?

SF: I can't remember who I was talking to, I can't remember if it was one of my officer friends or someone else, but we were talking about what you would have to do to fix the apartment and we were like, "You'd literally have to fire everyone and start over." When I was a rookie training, I learned how to run errands on duty. I learned how to pick up my dry cleaning, go check my mail. Some officers get haircuts. I learned how to sit - we call it "sitting on a call." Which is basically like, I get a call someone's house is broken into. I go, I get all the information. and then I go sit somewhere and type the report. But instead of clearing myself from the call on the computer, I just sit on it for another thirty minutes or an hour so that I don't have to do anything.

KA: Sure.

SF: And it's just - and when you have these rookies come out of the academy and they're so eager and they're so excited and we just want to save the world! And within two years, we are broken as well. Because we are tired of saving the world by ourselves while everyone else sits on their butt. I mean, we're literally taught to be broken from day one out of the academy. It's horrible. Kind of like when I went to that supervisor I was like, "This other officer does absolutely nothing and y'all know it." And his response was, "Well when you're a supervisor you'll understand." And I'm just like, "No when I'm a supervisor I'm going to do something about it. I'm going to not be afraid of his race or his gender or sexual orientation. Like he's not doing his job and I can prove it factually..

KA: wow.

SF: So it's really, when I think about and one of the most heartbreaking things is the way that the community views us.

KA: Yeah.

SF: So after I had left the department, I was on a on a training with one of my business coaches and she was a Black female and we were kind of talking about it and I said, I told her that I had been in officer and I said, "I'm afraid to tell people," and she said, "Why?" And I said, "Because of - because of what people think of officers." And in us talking about it, I finally came around to the conclusion. I said "I'm ashamed. And it's not because I did anything wrong." But it's like, I've dedicated thirteen years of my life to this only for people to hate me. But it's hard because there are absolutely corrupt officers, but some of us aren't. And so the generalization is very difficult. And that's why I said earlier I'm totally against generalization because I think too much we're looking at people and lumping them. Like, all white people are racist, all women are feminist, you know? We're lumping people simply so that - I don't know, like we can feel better about ourselves or we can relate, just as human beings. We are so empty and broken inside and don't know how to fix ourselves that we're just looking for something to cling on to, other people to connect with, it's like - I hate that one of the problems, one of the points of views with feminist is that they hate men. Which is so not true! I mean some of them do. But - so it starts creating this generalization. All women are feminists, so now all men feel like they have to defend

themselves so now men are attacking women for no reason. Like with my YouTube channel, I can't tell you - I'll post a YouTube short and I will get men just attacking me. When I have said nothing. Nothing about men, my channel isn't about men. I speak only to women. I'm lifting them up, I'm not bashing men but the men just come out of the woodwork to assault me and attack me and I'm just like, "My God, is this what we have come to?!" That everybody is on the offensive all the time because they're tired of being on the defensive so it's like let's attack the person before we get attacked.

KA: Right. I've experienced that too, posting especially on Instagram, I'll comment something like "I'm a woman in a male dominated field myself." Or I'll comment something about single women and the things that men say, I'm like "Whoa hold your horses here. What is going on?!" and I do feel like there's a general consensus in the world, especially over the last couple years to be on the offensive, and instead of sitting and listening and hearing what's actually being said and not what's not being said.

SF: Yeah. And I find myself getting very defensive when someone generalizes me. and I'm trying to learn how to navigate that because I immediately want to attack. When I'm just - because I'm like, 'just because I'm white does not mean I'm racist.' Like yes, I grew up with certain ideals because that's what I was taught and I didn't know any better. But I'm an adult now and I know better and I am working on it and I am learning and I'm asking questions and all of these things so please do not generalize me. You don't even know me!

KA: Yeah.

SF: Like you said, let's sit down and have a conversation because I'm certain you are not the person I'm judging you to be when I haven't even talked to you.

KA: Right.

SF: So I'm not the person you think I am. Like if we could just sit down and have a conversation and respect each other, like we could learn from each other and that's what we need.

KA: Yeah.

SF: But I think it does come down to: we've all been through some type of trauma or something that we have not been taught how to deal with and overcome, So we've repressed it and now we have this pain and this anger and we don't know what to do with it. And you know we just start spewing it because that's just what everybody else is doing.

KA: Yeah. Yeah that's good. One of the first questions that I wrote down since we started our conversation I was like, "Oh I should make sure to ask that," and it's way back when you were talking about patrol, yeah being on patrol. And then thinking about so many times when I've been like, "Okay, this is still a relevant question." How do we care for ourselves? Like, how do you care for yourself as an officer on patrol, as an officer in a toxic environment, in a world that is so on the offensive. How do we take care of ourselves in this kind of trauma?

SF: So what I have done for years since being an officer is - it's a double-edged sword. I unplug. I don't watch the news. I am on social media rarely. I mean the only reason I have a Facebook account is because I have a business and that's how you grow in today's world. But

when I was on patrol I was on a scene that I was there all day, a staircase had fallen on some children in an apartment complex. And the News came out and reported on it, and later that day I saw the news report. And I was like, "That's not what happened!" And in that moment I was just like, "I'm done. I'm done with the news," because news is now about sensationalism. They just want viewers and clicks and everything else. They're not reporting the truth. So years ago I learned to just stop watching the news on TV, and I don't follow it on social media and all of that sort of thing. Now the flip side of that is – and this is being me willing to admit my own ignorance, by choice unfortunately – is that I'm on the loop about what is going on with our culture. You know, like just the – and see? This is me showing my ignorance – I don't even know the correct way to say it but we have now identifying as she/her, he/him, they/them, those sort of things. Like I don't have a full understanding of that because I have chosen to unplug from the world because the world is so toxic but that now makes me ignorant. So that I don't understand how to say things without being insensitive, or offensive, or whatever. So it's just this double-edged sword that I myself am trying to figure out how to navigate. How do I keep myself protected from the toxicity so that I don't get sucked in? But, how do I also stay educated so that I understand, you know? And I know the right questions to ask!

KA: Right.

SF: Because if I don't even know what's going on, then I don't know what questions to ask so I don't know how to understand. And it's just like this vicious cycle. Years ago, whenever I was in patrol, I - before that when I was in graduate school I was suffering from depression. And I thought that I had worked through it, but it evolved from depression into repressed anger. And so I started getting trouble on the streets a lot 'cause I was being disrespectful to the community. Part of that is the police culture where, "Oh you know, we can cuss people out." [Stephanie laughs.] You know? "Oh, you have to communicate to them in a way that they can understand. So you can cuss to them." Which is not okay now. I know these things now. But I had all of this repressed anger and I was getting in trouble all the time with the community was complaining on me, my sergeants were tired of my attitude, all of these things. So I started going to therapy again but in that I had to learn what are the things that make me angry will all of these screwed up toxic things in the world make me angry, so I have to unplug from that. Well now, okay I need to stay educated as well. So it's just something I'm learning to balance but we get sucked in so easily to the drama and we've got to stop. We don't - there's a lot of "You have to choose a side!" You don't have to choose. You can seek information from both sides and draw your own conclusion. You don't have to choose. Now if it comes down to right and wrong, well then yes definitely, you should be choosing the right side. But if it's just you know, an idea. We're talking about different ideals or whatever. We don't have to gang up on each other. Instead have a conversation, you can agree to disagree. It's okay and you can still be friends and you can still be family. It doesn't have to be me or them. but we get sucked into the drama and I think it comes back to, we have such a deep feeling for belonging. From so much trauma in our lives we just want to belong and when we find a group no matter what they stand for, when we find a group that's willing to take us in we cling to that. Rather than asking ourselves, "What do I stand for? What do I want? And what do I believe?"

KA: Yeah. I had to do a practice in that this week. There had been something that had gone public that I was first hearing criticisms about, but it was something that I thought, "Well I feel like without hearing their criticisms, I would be all for this." So I had to sit down and like form my own opinion and then be like, "Okay this criticism I agree with, but I'm for it in this way," and sort of sitting in that uncomfortable middle where I'm like, "I understand your criticisms but at the end of the day I think this is really beautiful." And so trying to figure out what does this look like, but I had to stop listening to everyone else and form my own opinion, and then listen to their opinions in counterbalance with mine.

SF: Yeah that's kind of what happened to me in the last few weeks. Looking at feminism was - I always had this ignorant perspective on it because I had never taken the time to look into it and educate myself. I was just used to seeing the stuff on the media where men are just, or women are just hating on men and I'm like, "I don't hate men." But now it's like my eyes have been opened and that's how I realized, "Well I don't fully understand because I've never been in that situation." I've always worked with women, for women, or I've been discriminated against equally with other men, so I don't have this perspective. So it's like, now I need to take the time to do my own research and educate myself and make my own decision. Am I a feminist? Am I not? Am I somewhere in the middle? You know, what do I agree with? What do I don't? But that's something that I had to figure out on my own and it just, sometimes it takes weird things for us to see something in a different perspective. And that's another thing we hold against each other too much, is "Well you don't understand!" Well maybe I don't understand just because I can't wrap my head around it yet. It hasn't unfolded in my head the correct way to where I can understand it. And sometimes that takes time, so we also lack patience with each other.

KA: Yeah.

SF: You know, it's like, "Well you don't understand so I'm just done with you." But the person wants to understand and they're asking questions.

KA: Right.

SF: You're just frustrated because you can't make them see it your way, so you're just going to shut down. You know? They're still seeking to understand, they just haven't - sometimes we have to say things in a different way for it to make sense to someone else. And so, you know, we have to have the patience to be able to have the conversations when someone is asking us the difficult questions.

KA: Yeah, yeah that's so true. I got into a fight with a friend recently where we actually had the same goal, but our approaches in how we were going towards that goal were different and it ended the friendship, or at least has temporarily paused the friendship. Because even though we agreed with how we want this to turn out we've got different approaches and apparently those are irreconcilable.

SF: Yeah.

KA: And so that's hard.

SF: Yeah.

KA: So a couple more questions about policing if you still have a few minutes?

SF: Oh yeah, of course.

KA: What do you wish the general public knew about police officers?

SF: We are humans and we make mistakes too.

KA: Ooh that's good.

SF: I mean, we are held to such a high standard that people forget we are human beings. We screw up all the time too. It doesn't matter how much training we've had, it doesn't matter if we know the right thing to do, sometimes you're in a situation where shit hits the fan and you react. You know, even in our personal lives. We're put up on a pedestal even though people hate us. [Stephanie laughs.] It's such a weird thing.

KA: What a weird dichotomy.

SF: Yeah. You know, like it feels like the majority of the public hates us but at the same time they hold us to such a high standard that we can never live up to. You know, there's good doctors and bad doctors, and good doctors make mistakes and people die. You know? We make mistakes too. It doesn't excuse a lot of the things that have happened, there are some things that were not mistakes, should not have been handled the way they were handled. But at the end of the day, please just remember we are moms, we are dads. We want to go home at the end of every day. Like we are actually - the majority of the academy is CYA for the Department, but we are taught that at the end of the day we go home. Because we have a family too. And people forget that. They forget that, that we're human beings just like you. And we make mistakes just like you. Even when we know better, even when we know what we're supposed to do.

KA: Sure.

SF: We make mistakes.

KA: Yeah, yeah that's so valid. And I think that we all make mistakes and we all want to go home at the end of the day.

SF: Exactly!

KA: But it's a lot harder for you to be able to get there than it is for somebody like me. So let's talk a little bit about like, the police related deaths. I know you don't really watch the news but I'm sure you've heard about them.

SF: Yeah.

KA: What are your thoughts from your perspective?

SF: So the only one that I paid attention to, simply because it was just - was George Floyd.

KA: Sure.

SF: And that is one where I was seeking to understand and I wasn't afraid to ask difficult questions. Because when it first happened and I saw the very first video, my immediate

response was – and I didn't have all the information because remember we're going by only what the media is willing to tell you and willing to show you – so that's like, point number one: you weren't there. [Stephanie laughs.] For everybody. You weren't there. Point number two: you weren't him, because sometimes we get in really difficult situations. When I first saw it I was like, "I I don't understand the outrage," because what I saw was an officer just restraining a man who had been violent. Now once again, this is the information I was given from the media. A man had been violent, they thought he was on an overdose of drugs, and he was restraining him waiting for backup. This is all the information I had. And everything was about race. So I went to my lieutenant, a Black man, and I said, "I wanted to ask you," and he knew I was being respectful. I said, "I'm having trouble understanding why this is about race. Can you help me understand?" And he said, "If the suspect had been a white man in a rich neighborhood, would he have been treated that way?" And that hit home for me. I was like, "No." And that's - that put it in complete perspective for me, because what I realized is I was looking at it from the point of view as an officer. What I would have done in that situation. Instead of looking at it from just the general public and just, if we were to look at things as equal, equality, treating everyone equal and the same. Would he have been treated that way if he was a rich white male? Absolutely not. And then of course more information started coming out about how he had been, I don't know if it was like thirty minutes or something, he had been laying there. He was unconscious for a long time. And all of those things like, we're just like, "Oh my God, no!" Like, we are taught - we are actually taught to restrain in certain ways, we're to check that they're breathing, we're to call a supervisor, like there are all of these things. And these are things that came out before the George Floyd murder. So we're taught all of these safety things and if they're in distress, I mean we pick them up, we call an ambulance, like there's all of these things we do. So in saying, you know it's just like, what was going through his head? You know, it makes you wonder. And we don't know. I mean, I didn't watch any of the trial or any of that sort of thing, but commenting on that I'm just like, it was - shouldn't have been handled that way. I mean, they could have picked him up and put him in the patrol car. There's any number of things that could have been done differently. But at the end of the day, I mean I will stand by, you know, he should have gotten him up or if he saw that he wasn't breathing, he should have done something. Absolutely. I will also stand by: we weren't the officers on scene, simply because I've been in those shoes as well. I've had many a conversation with my mother and other people where they're just going by what they see on media and they don't understand. And so then I will explain to them, "Well it could have been this, it could have been this. We don't know how their Department teaches them to do this certain thing," or whatever. So there are a lot of other things that can go into that, that we just don't know. So you know a little bit of grace in you're not in the officer's shoes so you don't know what you would have done. But absolutely, it should not have been handled that way.

KA: Yeah, yeah that's valid. And that's good to hear that yes, there is gray area but there are also things that are absolutely inappropriate and that what was at least witnessed as far as we know.

SF: Yeah, like preservation of life is absolutely number one. No matter what, we are taught that. Our life and everyone else's. Like if there's a car accident on the road, the very first thing we do is get everybody off the road and call an ambulance if anyone is injured. It's always preservation of life first. So even with the violent suspect, we are restraining them but we are doing

everything we can to make sure that they're still breathing and they're okay and they're not injured.

KA: No, that's so good. And that if everything were built off of that principle I think we'd be in a lot better place.

SF: Yeah.

KA: So in your opinion, what would make policing better? Besides firing everyone and starting over.

SF: Yeah, I mean firing everyone and starting over. [Stephanie and Katie laugh.] It's - it has to start within the Department. The Department has to change and then the community has to see the change. Well the community's not even seeing what's really going on, the community is seeing what the Department wants them to see. So the community doesn't even know what's going on unfortunately. I didn't realize until I left the Department just how stressful it was going to work every day and knowing that I was just a number. Like we all just go to work everyday knowing we're just a number, and we could lose our job for not even doing anything wrong. But I - and that's stressful and it's a heavy weight, but I didn't realize how stressful and how heavy until I no longer worked for the Department and I was like, "Wow that was just a toxic thing to carry every single day." So within the Department, it's got to be - a lot of systems have to change. I do not know why other police departments in the nation look to ours for how we do things because like, our promotional system to go from an officer to a sergeant is by taking a written exam. Has nothing to do with leadership, has nothing to do with if you do everything you're supposed to do and don't bend any of the rules, and all of these things. Like, why are we promoting people into leadership positions because they're book smart?

KA: Sure.

SF: You know? So that's one problem, is we have people who - who aren't leaders at all in leadership positions. There's the internal politics, there's the good old boy system, there's the checklist we have to fill our quota for the a certain number of everything in all positions. It's all about external looks, you know? We don't care about our people, we just care about how we look to the outside world. And our officers need to know that they're safe. They don't feel safe and it's not from the community, it's from our own Department. We don't feel safe, like when they got the body cams, all the officers were freaking out. We swore up and down you're going to use this against us, and the Department swore up and down, "No we're not, this is going to protect you because if anybody complains then we have proof." Well what did they do? Like if an officer hits the button and it doesn't turn on they're getting punished for it. For being human! You didn't turn your camera on, you got on scene and you forgot to turn on your camera for the first five minutes. You're getting punished for it. And it's just like, there's just no respect, no one feels safe, the culture's just toxic. Like all of that has to go away. Until the officers feel seen and heard and respected and safe, they're not going to change. Because right now there is an every man for himself mentality and there's zero trust. No one trusts anyone. I mean, you don't trust people at all.

KA: Yeah.

SF: It's very difficult. You have like the same five people your entire career that are your friends and that you trust because you don't know who to trust. No one trusts anybody. There's no trust, no respect, no safety. It's awful. So there's - you know, you can't just say one thing's gotta change. Like, almost everything has to change and where do you start? You know, our chief, our chief is chosen by our mayor. So our mayor is going to choose somebody that's going to do what they tell them to do. That's just more politics. You're not doing what's right for the officers in the Department, you're doing what's right to make us look good to the community. I mean, it's all a game

KA: Yeah. Yuck.

SF: Yeah, unfortunately it's never going to change. And I don't know if I would say it gets worse. I just feel like it's evolving with the times. It just changes, it just -

KA: For the negative

SF: It just - Yeah. It just molds and it mends to what's going on now. Now we have body cams, how can we make this toxic for our officers? It's just - it's a job I wouldn't wish on anybody and it's a perspective that I wish more of the community knew and understood, to just give us a little bit more grace. Because you know, they think that we have all this power when every single day we feel completely powerless.

KA: That's hard, that's really hard.

SF: Yeah. Yeah.

KA: What have I not asked you that you want to share about?

SF: Umm, I think we - I think we did a good job, kinda covering all my complaints. [Stephanie and Katie laugh.] It's like, what do I want to air out! No, I think we did a good job kind of covering everything because the biggest problem is really within the Department. And the community doesn't know that and doesn't understand that. And maybe you know, maybe this podcast will get like five million listens and the Department will feel some pressure to change, you know! [Stephanie laughs.]

KA: Maybe! [Stephanie and Katie laugh.]

SF: No, I think we covered everything. It's just - I want people to know the truth.

KA: Yeah. I feel like it comes back to leadership principle of like, take care of your people and they'll take care of everything else. So I wish that that were implemented and it's a generalization again, but within police departments of like, "Take care of your officers and they'll take care of the general public."

SF: Right.

KA: But it sounds like it's all very cutthroat and very, each person for themselves. And no one is looking out for each other, not officers for each other, and definitely not officers for the public, and not the public for the officers either. So it's just kind of perpetuates the brokenness.



SF: I feel proud of how I left the Department. Because those three officers know that I stood up for them, and I had their back when I told them that I would. Because when I first became a supervisor I said, "I'm going to be the supervisor that I wish I always had." And I always told my officers, 'cause when they get a new supervisor they're like, "Oh crap," you know? Like, "What is this person going to be like?" And I told them, I said "Look, I will always have your back. As long as you haven't done anything wrong, broken any rules or any laws or whatever, I will go to bat for you." And at the end of the day, that's what I did. I went to bat for my officers and I left with my head held high, and those three officers will respect me until the day I die because I stood up for them. I did what was right and I'm good with that.

KA: Wow, yeah.

SF: Now if we could just get everybody to do that! [Stephanie laughs.]

KA: Right? Right! The whole world would be a different place.

SF: Yes, do what's right people! Do the right thing.

KA: Yeah, no that's good. That's so good. Well Stephanie, thank you so much for your time today, for being willing to share your perspective, to be willing to go there. I know this wasn't easy for you. And so thank you for being able to - to do that and for trusting us with your story.

SF: Of course, it was good to finally be able to tell it.

KA: Yay! I do have one final question for you.

SF: Okay!

KA: Here on the podcast we are always learning something, that's the beauty of hearing different perspectives. And I would love to learn: what is something that you have learned recently?

SF: I've been really, really diving into personal development and trying to seek out my own trauma and why I am the way that I am, and see the way that those sorts of things. I think, I don't really have a specific thing. Oh! You know what I do! Okay! See I wasn't prepared for this but I can. [Stephanie laughs.]

KA: I know, that's the fun part of the question!

SF: Okay, so what I've learned in the last year and a half in - you know, I'm going through a divorce, I'm out of my own now, and starting my business is. I'm actually wearing a bracelet and it says, "Everything you want is on the other side of fear." And what I have learned in the last year and a half is that we absolutely have to step into the fear. We are so afraid of everything, we're so afraid of the unknown, and I have been forcing myself to "Okay this scares the crap out of me but I'm going to do it!" And then I do it and I'm like, "Okay I survived! I'm alright." And then I get a little more courage. And then the next thing comes along and I'm like, "Okay well if I want to grow my business I've got to do this." Like I used to hate posting on social media, I was terrified of it. But I started making myself do it. I stepped into that fear and I survived! And I was like, "Okay I've got a little bit more courage," you know? A little bit more confidence. And so I've just learned that if I'm not willing to step into the fear, then I'm going to go nowhere, you know?

And even if I step into the fear and fall on my face, well I mean I still did it. And I still have the confidence to be like, “Okay even though I fell in my face I'm still alive! I'm okay.”

KA: Right.

SF: Just everything, everything, everything. All of our growth, our hopes, our dreams, all of it is on the other side of our fear and if we are not willing to step through that fear to the other side, we're just going to stay stuck forever. So. That's the biggest thing I've learned that has just empowered me so much, is just “Okay, I'm afraid of it, but I gotta do it.”

KA: Yeah, no that's good. It's the thirty seconds of courage, right? [Stephanie laughs.] Those things that you can accomplish in thirty seconds and it just takes thirty seconds of corseage to get there. Well thank you so much again for sharing your story and your perspective with us. I've got so much that I want to go process and learn more about based on what you've already told me, so thank you so much for it.

SF: You're very welcome, thank you!

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays in the background as Katie speaks.]

Katie: As always a big thanks for listening. I hope that you are challenged. I hope that you are willing to challenge some of the things that you heard. I hope that you've understood a little bit more. To hear another perspective on policing, check out Episode {61} with Leonard McDonald answers the questions about race that we feel like we can't ask, including “what is defending the police and how is it going to help?” If you enjoy conversations like this, be sure to hit subscribe because we're going to be back in two weeks with another guest with another perspective. Until then, my friend know that you are loved, know that you are cared for, know that your story matters, your perspective matters and you are making a difference. We'll see you soon. Bye.

[Katie stops speaking and the theme music: upbeat electronica ends.]