

Narrator Eleanor Klibanoff: It's February 2021, and I'm hustling across town, late for a community forum. You probably get this by now, but Louisville loves a community forum. This one was a chance for the clergy to meet the city's new police chief.

Narrator: By early 2021, a lot had changed in Louisville. Police Chief Steve Conrad had been fired. The nightly protests had died down after months. No one had been charged for killing Breonna Taylor — but one officer was facing charges of wanton endangerment for firing bullets into Taylor's neighbor's apartment and two more officers had been fired.

Narrator: The city settled a lawsuit with Taylor's family for \$12 million dollars, the largest settlement in city history, and agreed to a slew of reforms. Metro Council approved a new short-term union contract that raised officer salaries — now, finally, a new officer at LMPD will make what they would have made in 2004, taking inflation into account .

Narrator: They hired a new chief, who Mayor Greg Fischer called a reform-minded leader committed to the ideals of 21st Century Policing.

Narrator: But despite all this — the anger — the frustration. The disconnect between the police and the community was still there — in fact, it seemed like the chasm between the two was wider than ever. Which I saw firsthand when I got to this community forum —

Man, shouting passionately: Y'all know what's wrong in the community. Y'all know why they killing each other in the community. There's no jobs in the community unless you flipping burgers. If you got felonies, the only thing you can do is flip burgers. And then you tell them, you're not supposed to sell drugs. How? When you got ten fucking kids? (crowd noise) Sorry, I'm in a church. You got 10 kids? How you supposed to feed your family?

Narrator: Antonio Brown was standing among the pews, yelling at the city officials on stage — and in the audience. The Mayor was sitting in the front row of the church, and he was the focus of a lot of the anger.

Narrator: People joined Brown in airing their grievances, loudly and emotionally. The pastor of the church, who also works for the city, took a mic and started yelling back at Brown —

Antonio Brown: White supremacy system is what it is

Pastor: Listen! Listen! This is my house!

Narrator: Through the throngs of people, I spotted Bishop Dennis Lyons. Lyons was that community policing true believer, the pastor whose funeral home had buried David McAtee.

Narrator: He was sitting in the second row, alone. His head was in his hands. His eyes were closed. It was the first and only time I've ever seen him look truly weary.

Narrator: Lyons has spent a lot of his life trying to get people to come out to these forums, to be as passionate and civically engaged as he is. But he's disappointed that the community is still having to cause a commotion to be heard by city leadership. I talked to him after:

Bishop Dennis Lyons: This is the only time they get a chance to share with the mayor what they, on their hearts. That tells us that he is not opening up his office...this is a result of the government not connecting with those protesters.

Narrator: Sitting in the pews, watching this scene unfold, it really sunk in for me just how shattered this city was — and how much it would take to glue it all back together.

Narrator: I also couldn't keep my eyes off one of the people sitting on stage. She was, by my recollection, the only other white woman there. She didn't say much as the event devolved into a yelling match — just watched as the scab was ripped right off this city's barely healing wound. I had so many questions about what she was thinking at that moment.

Narrator: LMPD has not made Erika Shields, the new chief, available for an interview with us. So we can't actually know. But if I was her, I would have been thinking — what the hell have I gotten myself into?

Narrator: This is Dig, Season Two, The Model City, from the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Newsy. I'm Eleanor Klibanoff.

[Ambient noise of a forum]

Louisville's League of Women Voters had more luck than I did with Chief Shields. She sat down with them recently for a conversation on...

**Introducer: Thank you Chief Shields...
... Policing reform**

Narrator: Shields was interviewed by Wayne Tuckson, a doctor who also does health segments on local TV.

Wayne Tuckson: Chief Erika Shields joins the Louisville Metropolitan Police Department after serving as the chief of police for the Atlanta Police Department. Chief Shields has been an outspoken leader in police reform...

Narrator: After 25 years with the Atlanta Police Department, including three and a half as chief, Shields took the helm of LMPD in January 2021.

<<run under narration>> In addition, Chief Shields recognized the critical nature of engaging the communities in which the police serve and is committed to listening to and valuing feedback in making decisions.

Narrator: Shields may have been everything Tuckson was describing — but if people in Louisville knew her name before she got to town, it was probably because she resigned from the Atlanta Police Department in June 2020, the same month Chief Steve Conrad was fired from LMPD. Shields also left over a police shooting — at the height of the protests, an Atlanta Police officer shot and killed 27-year-old Rayshard Brooks in a Wendy's parking lot.

Wayne Tuckson: If you will join me in welcoming Chief Erika Shields.

Chief Erika Shields: Thank you, Doctor, that bio is about five minutes too long. We'll work on that.

Wayne Tuckson: Well you should do five minutes less great things. Right now, my car is being towed.

Narrator: Ok, fine, I can sort of see why this guy gets an interview and I don't.

Narrator: At this event, Shields discussed her policing philosophy — some of which deviated from past practice at LMPD. While Chief Conrad had emphasized what he called a people, places, narcotics strategy —

Chief Erika Shields: The big thing for me is that we're not going to be place based. We're not going to go after narcotics.

Narrator: Shields said the department was going to focus on getting illegal guns and violent criminals off the street. She said she was particularly sensitive to the history of targeting Black neighborhoods with aggressive drug enforcement.

Chief Erika Shields: I do absolutely not want to arrest my way out of anywhere. And I tell my troops from day one, we are not to be out locking up young black men, period. That accomplishes nothing.

Narrator: But a lot of what Shields was talking about at this policing reform event — sounded pretty familiar. She said traffic stops had declined significantly in Louisville after a series of high-profile incidents — referring to Tae-Ahn Lea, among others. But Shields said she was bringing them back.

Chief Erika Shields: Traffic is critical to keeping a city safe, whether it's speeding, DUI or people who are trafficking narcotics, stolen cars, carjacking. You think the criminals don't know if the police aren't stopping them? They know before you do.

Narrator: But she said they were going to emphasize accountability for officers, and fair and equitable policing for all communities—

Chief Erika Shields: I should police the same way in an affluent neighborhood as I would in a neighborhood that is lower income.

Narrator: Shields said at the heart of all of this was relationship building, community policing, getting officers out of their cars —

Chief Erika Shields: I really hope that we can get our staffing to a point that we can have more of that consistent community outreach because it's so important.

Narrator: If all of this sounds familiar — it should. Louisville wasn't the only city that was recognized way back in 2016 for its commitment to 21st Century Policing. Louisville was one of 15 cities — and Atlanta was another. I followed Shields out of this event —

Narrator Eleanor Klibanoff, to Shields: Do you still sort of stand by the tenets of 21st Century Policing that you brought to Atlanta?

Chief Erika Shields: Oh yeah. Oh, it was fantastic. It was President Obama's task force on it and very relevant. They need to come out with a 2.0.

Narrator to Shields: What would be different in 2.0?

Chief Erika Shields: It would be further inroads on how use of force training is done, there'd be more along the lines of transparency...A lot has changed in the last six years that you could get...

Narrator to Shields: Do you think that you instituted it successfully in Atlanta?

Chief Erika Shields: I think we instituted a number of things successfully. But it's not reasonable to think things are just going to go well...there's going to be issues you have to correct, things that are going to happen that you wish didn't. How do you navigate out of it, how do you handle it... so there you go.

Shields to narrator: You're good —

Narrator to Shields: Thank you, we are hoping to get a longer interview —

Chief Erika Shields: Okie doke.

Narrator: We never got that longer interview with Shields — but we did get a chance to sit down with Mayor Greg Fischer, who oversaw the period of policing reform that we've been looking at.

[Eleanor Klibanoff and Mayor Greg Fischer sitting down for an interview, chitchatting about the Derby

Eleanor: Happy Derby week?

Mayor Fischer: Well, it's a little different.]

Narrator: Greg Fischer has been Mayor of Louisville since 2011 — or 11 Kentucky Derbies. He's a Democrat from a prominent Louisville family who was originally elected on the strength of his business experience. You know those fountain soda machines at gas stations or restaurants? He and another guy invented one of those in his mid-20s.. Now, Fischer in his 60s, a successful entrepreneur, business owner and investor — and at the very end of his tenure as Mayor of Louisville.

Narrator: I've interviewed Fischer several times, mostly at press conferences or after public forums. But in April, I got my first chance to sit down with him one-on-one to talk about 21st Century Policing.

Narrator: He acknowledged that his administration hadn't always exercised enough oversight of the police department.

Mayor Greg Fischer: My recommendation would be for another mayor is to constantly be doing third-party deep reviews of your police force.

Narrator: Do you regret not doing that more intensively in 2015?

Mayor Greg Fischer: In retrospect, I do. And I don't know if it would have solved anything or not... Again, as a business person, it is always good to be doing internal review and external review with your customers... We put in something that did not produce good enough results for us to guide us forward that maybe would have circumvented some of these tragedies.

Narrator: But Fischer said — he's never been more optimistic about this city's future.

Mayor Greg Fischer: What I see — the opportunity coming out of this — is to be a model city in terms of police reform, police community legitimacy, co-production of safety with the police and the community, and then racial equity as well. So that's our goal. That's what I'm going to continue to work on until the last day in office ... The consciousness that's been raised in this country around race and racism. In the 1960s, white America had a chance to get that right and totally blew it. And you know, my hope and I'll fight with every fiber in my body is to make sure in the 2020s, that does not happen here.

Narrator: But couldn't you argue that Louisville was given the chance to be that model city, to rethink all of this stuff, to be on the vanguard of all of this in 2015? And blew it?

Mayor Greg Fischer: No, I think that's a really, uh, no, that's a gotcha kind of thing. Because things happen in life, no matter how perfect you are... no matter how hard you try, it's things outside of your control.

Narrator: It's not just my opinion that things aren't working in Louisville. In January, consulting firm Hillard Heintze published a top-to-bottom review of the police department. It confirmed so much of what citizens and police officers have been saying for years.

Narrator: Black people are disproportionately stopped by the police. Officers are insufficiently trained on new policies. There are gaps in the department's accountability systems. 75 percent of officers say they would leave the department if they could. With all these challenges —

Narrator to Mayor: What is going to be different this time around from 2015? Like, it sounds like the exact same plan?

Mayor Greg Fischer: What is different now? With LMPD? Hillard Heintze top to bottom review...

Narrator to Mayor: 200 officers down, you know, you've got 75% of officers say they want to leave, you've got no community police trust seems like you got a homicide spike, unlike what we even saw in 2016. It seems like things are worse than they were.

Mayor Greg Fischer: Okay. So that's the negative side. What's on the corrective action side? You've got Hillard Heintze top to bottom review, tremendous community interest in reforming the police department, you've got a very strong reform-minded chief with Chief Erika Shields, you've got the Department of Justice that's helping us identify where our problems are...

Narrator: Louisville did have a lot of those same things back in 2015 — including technical assistance and coaching from the Department of Justice. Back then, the feds came to Louisville to cheerlead the city's efforts to reform itself.

Narrator: That is *not* why they are here now, in 2021.

Male voice: Today the Justice Department is opening a civil investigation into the Louisville Jefferson County Metro Government...

Narrator: That's Merrick Garland, the U.S. Attorney General.

Merrick Garland: to determine whether LMPD engages in a pattern or practice of violations of the Constitution or federal law.

Narrator: Garland said they're looking into the department's search warrant procedures, allegations of racial bias, stops, searches and seizures, and use of force against peaceful protesters.

Narrator: This is one of the most severe steps the federal government can take — a sign that they believe a local police department may require federal intervention to ensure they're not violating their citizens' civil rights.

Narrator: It's also what 21st Century Policing was supposed to help prevent. This model was a roadmap to policing reform which would help departments shape up before things got to a crisis point.

Narrator: That didn't happen — and now — Louisville seems primed to just...try the same thing again.

Narrator to Mayor: I guess I'm just not sure what's meaningfully different now, other than the fact that we had a tragedy.

Mayor Greg Fischer: Oh, I really disagree with you there. I mean, do you think America is meaningfully different today in terms of concerns around racism and addressing racism and understanding where police reform is part of that? It's very different.

Yes. But different in part because police departments didn't start this process in 2014.

Mayor Greg Fischer: Yeah. So you're answering your question. That's the opportunity right now, there is more awareness and knowledge of the need for reform and change now, than I think, anytime throughout my lifetime, and so will we be smart enough to seize that? I know here in Louisville, we'll be working on that to do it every day.

<<music>>

Narrator: In a subsequent statement, Jean Porter, the mayor's director of communications, reiterated that the city still supports the tenets of 21st Century Policing, and said, quote, we are committed to community policing, to building greater trust between LMPD and the larger community they are sworn to serve and protect.

Narrator: She pointed to a number of reforms the city has promised in the wake of the Breonna Taylor shooting and protests. The city said they were finally going to institute that early warning system they'd claimed for years to have. They have asked the Kentucky State Police to investigate police shootings, have created a civilian review board, and are going to offer incentives to get officers to live in the city.

Narrator: Do you know what all of those reforms have in common? They were all reforms LMPD considered implementing six years ago, with 21st Century Policing.

Narrator: And even now — some of those promises are still falling short. The civilian review board has been criticized as insufficient because it wasn't granted subpoena power by the state

legislature. The outside agency investigating police shootings has proven less transparent than LMPD was. And that early warning system — it still hasn't been activated.

<<music>>

Narrator: But still — some people in Louisville are willing to believe that this time could be different — or at least aren't willing to give up yet..

[ambient sound from downtown: traffic noise, wind]

Narrator: On a recent Tuesday afternoon, LMPD Officer Dexter Pitts was standing down at Jefferson Square Park, the epicenter of the Breonna Taylor protest movement.

Narrator: The city has promised to put up a permanent marker in the square. These days — it's pretty quiet.

Narrator: Dexter is doing one of his favorite parts of the job— chatting people up. He directs a woman to the proper building to pay her taxes.

Dexter Pitts giving directions to a woman: Taxes? Gotta give the government their pound of flesh, right? [laughter]

Narrator: Dexter returned to LMPD amid the protests last June. The last year has taken a toll on him. He's working a ton of overtime and watching officers flee the department. But he likes what he's heard from Chief Shields so far —

Dexter Pitts: I'm an optimistic person with this. I think she's going to do good things here, I really do...No sane person is going to come to do this job...So I respect her for coming here.

Narrator: That's a compliment. [long pause] I think. While he's standing out in the square, a car pulls up — and out pops Bishop Dennis Lyons.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: Pitts, Pitts, Pitts, tell me about it buddy. [To reporter] Hey, he's like my brother. We go back, don't we, probably 10 years.

Dexter Pitts: Yes yes yes...

Bishop Dennis Lyons: We were like what the book says the police and the community are supposed to be like. If every policeman had his demeanor and every citizen had mine, it would be a team. It really would.

Narrator: They're just shooting the breeze for a while, and Lyons shares with Dexter that he's been frustrated by the lack of relationship building between the clergy and Chief Shields.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: So Erika never did get a chance to talk to the preachers, and we never did, preachers, get a chance to connect. So the preachers and the chief still don't know.

Narrator: Lyons started off really skeptical of Chief Shields because of the Rayshard Brooks shooting.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: I came with that prejudice, against Erika Shields. So when I first seen her it was like, she aint right.

Narrator: But Lyons says he began to compare her record to former LMPD Chief Conrad's. The protesters had wanted Conrad to take responsibility for Breonna Taylor's death, fire the officers, and resign.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: And so when I looked at Erika, I said ... she owned up to it, was their fault, and she resigned. I said, oh, okay...Then I began to gain respect for why she left.

Narrator: Lyons has seen several police chiefs come and go in Louisville. He's been doing this work for decades. Most people would have given up years ago. But — and this is definitely a compliment — Lyons is not most people. He really believes this time might be different.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: Back then, 21st century, there was nothing on the table as far as the black community was concerned to ensure that the 21st century policing would be initiated...we just had their word. On this table, we got almost 300 some days, we got broken windows...we got the courthouse windows are boarded-up, businesses, tourism has gone... we got on this table, when you say yes, we are interested, yes, you are interested.

Narrator: He's starting to see some positive changes — Lyons has started regularly meeting with the 2nd Division Major for breakfast, and he's been called out to homicide scenes to de-escalate crowds like he's always wanted. He's trying again — and hoping that, this time, it might work.

Narrator: But — for a lot of people, it's not so simple. Like Will Pitts. He's lost so much — his friend, David McAtee, killed by law enforcement. Marvin McAtee, killed by gun violence. You can see the cost of this city's failures weighing on his shoulders.

Narrator: On a weeknight last April, a few days after the feds announced their investigation of LMPD, the Department of Justice hosted a Zoom call to explain how the community can participate in the investigative process.

DOJ staffer on Zoom call: We want to hear everything that you have to say about LMPD. It could be things that are negative, things that are positive, all across the spectrum....

Narrator: Will Pitts is in his basement, watching the meeting with his wife Kris.

DOJ staffer: We ask that you just kind of trust the process,

Will Pitts [repeats, incredulously] Trust the process.

DOJ staffer: We ask that you speak to us one more time, you know, raise your voice one more time.

Will Pitts: Wow.

DOJ staffer: So that we can...<<crosstalk>>

Will Pitts: How long have we been trusting the process?

Narrator: Will and Kris are having a hard time being optimistic about all these big promises coming out of the computer screen.

Kris Pitts: I don't want to wait forever, you know what I mean? Investigations, this type have started years ago before a public announcement...

Will Pitts: And we — scuse me, I don't mean to cut you off — but we stand to lose another hundred kids while y'all are trying to figure it out. We stand to lose another two hundred people at the rate it's going now. So something has to be done today

Kris encourages him to reach out to the investigators, share his experience with LMPD.

Kris Pitts: You gonna go out there?

Will Pitts: Shiiiiiiiit.

Kris Pitts: You can't talk the talk if you won't walk the walk.

Will Pitts: I'm not going up there, hell no.

Kris Pitts: You can meet with them and tell them your story.

Narrator: Even after moving out of the neighborhood, Will Pitts always kept one foot in the community that made him —visiting family, mentoring young people, and, for years, helping out at Yaya's. He coaches basketball: Team Willenium is made up of boys from around the city. He's trying to help them find their path to success through basketball, just like he did.

Narrator: But the last 18 months has shaken that relationship with the West End.

Will Pitts: You get signs, right. You get inklings, or indications, of — if you don't change, something bad is going to happen. Will, if you don't get off of 26th St., you may be next...It's time that I not abandon the community, but wash my hands of the foolishness that's in the community...I spent enough time down there, you know, with the passing of Yaya all the way until Marvin...so in order for me to move on I guess I had to close the chapter, I had to close to, you know, had to turn the page on that.

Narrator: The family made the difficult decision to close Yaya's.

Will Pitts: It came to the point where, you know, we had to let it go. There was no more meaning, no more justifying...now it's like, whoa, it's two people in three months. It's time to let it go, and that was probably the hardest thing to do.

Narrator: That little storefront restaurant sits empty now. On a fence out front, there's handmade memorials for David and Marvin — sun-faded signs, mementos and keepsakes. Will goes out there sometimes — in daylight hours — to keep the memorials tidy. He sweeps up, throws out any garbage, and organizes the memories.

Will Pitts: Everything that's ever been given and left, you know, we try to keep it around because whoever left it, you know, he meant something to that person. Somebody, maybe, will see this hanging and say, man that's my — you know...

Narrator: It's a way to stay connected to this place — a place that once gave him so much joy, and now represents a complicated, painful period in his life. No one has been charged in David McAtee's death. Marvin's remains unsolved.

Will Pitts: Devastating. I don't know if you ever lost a loved one, but, you know, it doesn't feel good. Especially prematurely. ...We can't just sit around and wait on who's going to be next,

Narrator: There has been so much death,

so much destruction,

so much unnecessary pain and loss.

Will Pitts: And the saddest part is, you know, it's, you know, them two death's is just one of many. You know what i mean, It's tragic. That this is a reality, you know, in our community. I pray and hope, man, we do better and get better.

Narrator: Will never ended up talking to the Department of Justice. He doesn't see the point. He says federal intervention isn't going to change anything. The city making big reform promises... again... isn't going to change anything.

Narrator: The only thing that's going to change anything... is people.

people who've suffered because of this city's failures;

people who stepped into their power in 2020;

people who aren't willing to wait for the city to fix itself.

People like him.

Narrator: Because Will Pitts is still here. And he's still trying to make Louisville the city David McAtee believed it could be. The city HE believes it could be.

Narrator: The city it SHOULD be.

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