

Devon Clunis, badge #1509

Canada's First Black Police Chief

By John Burchill, Chief of Staff, for the Winnipeg Police Service



Devon was born in Harmony Vale, Jamaica, in 1963. He came to Winnipeg as an 11-year old boy in 1975. The journey wasn't easy but Winnipeg provided all the necessary ingredients to help that *Little boy from Jamaica* to be appointed Winnipeg's 17th Chief of Police in 2012, and the first black Chief of Police in Canadian history.

When he first arrived in Winnipeg from Jamaica in 1975 he never dreamed he would be a police officer. Let alone the first black Chief of Police in the history of this country. However, he became a police officer because he wanted to make a difference.

"When I started school in the North End, I was the only one who looked like me", Devon has said. "On television, the bad guys looked like me. I never saw a black police officer in Winnipeg. As a young person, I was profoundly aware of the depiction of blacks and other minorities in mainstream media".

"However you don't have to let someone else define you", he continued. "I didn't set out to make any type of history. I simply wanted to make a difference -- to be an example for the youth in our City. I was able to be successful because key people stepped into my life at significant places."

"Role models cross ethnic boundaries. One of my first role models was a white teacher – Mrs. Hannah. She took the extra time for a young boy, struggling with change and cultural upheaval in a new country, to help me become the top student in my school by grade 9. It didn't matter what colour I was.

"When I started with the Winnipeg Police almost 34 years ago there were few black members of the Service. I later learned that the first black police officer in

Winnipeg was Allen Mayes who was hired in 1975, the same year I arrived in Canada. However, times have changed since then. The Service now has representation from all races and nationalities. In fact, there are almost 200 police and civilian members of visible minority groups. As we saw in Mike Stephens's life story for this year's Black History month, each is a role model and an example for their community."



"So my message to you during Black History Month, and every month, is make a difference. Today we live in an amazing country where we have the opportunity as individuals to contribute to the health and welfare of our society. To become leaders in our community – doctors, lawyers, police chiefs, politicians, teachers, coaches ... the possibilities are endless. Celebrating our unique culture and heritage, recognizing our role models and celebrating our accomplishments is what unites us".

"Cultural diversity and the pursuit of cultural development by all people and all nations are sources of mutual enrichment for us all. Diversity is our strength".



During Devon's 29-years with the Winnipeg Police, he served in all major areas of the Service, from uniform patrol, plainclothes investigations, Community Relations, Organizational Development & Support, to a number of administrative leadership roles. He was first promoted to the senior officer rank of Inspector in 2007, then to Superintendent and finally Chief of Police on November 2, 2012.

During that time Devon also answered the call to become a Police Chaplain. He remained extremely active as a Chaplain up to the time of his appointment as Chief of Police, during which he attended multiple courses at the Providence University College & Theological Seminary.

His legacy as a police chaplain is two-fold. The first item being that he initiated dramatic changes to the Chaplain program. Under his direction, Devon broadened

the scope of the Chaplain program to ensure all members, and their respective families had access to spiritual assistance regardless of where they were at in their faith journey, or on many occasions when a person did not have a faith. In essence, his focus was not to convert people to Christianity, but rather to offer loving support during times of need. In 2001 he travelled to New York to assist officers and families after the tragic events of 9/11.

The second item that will not be forgotten is the high level of care, compassion and integrity he consistently brought forward in every word or action. These qualities enabled him to gain a strong level of trust and respect from the membership. As a result, he was routinely called upon to officiate at weddings, funerals, or to simply sit down to hear someone's concerns. Devon's love for people allowed him to make quick and easy connections with those he came into contact with. His non-judgmental approach opened the door for many deep discussions on life and death, and he brought comfort to more people than can ever be counted.



Devon never hid his faith as a police officer, openly embracing it. Years before he became Chief of Police he was interviewed by the Winnipeg Free Press about being the "Force's Spiritual Guide" and the importance of being a police Chaplain:



"Really, one of the most integral parts is just simply being there to have those informal conversations with people," he said. "Somebody will simply come into your office, they're having some real difficulties, whether it be family or medical issues, and they will say: 'Would you pray for me?' And I say, 'Absolutely, let's do it right now.'"

Within weeks of the announcement of his appointment as Chief in 2012 Devon was interviewed with Christian Week, a Winnipeg-based national news publication. The mainstream media had a field day by reporting his suggestion that harnessing the power of prayer could help stem the tide of serious crime facing the City. Many in the press saw the discussion of his faith and prayer as an abdication of responsibility. As reported in Alliance magazine in 2013:

[The media] reacted by mocking the chief, questioning his ability and criticizing his ethics. Arthur Schafer, an ethicist with the University of Manitoba, said, "I think it's entirely inappropriate for a chief of police, in his role as chief of police, to be

advocating prayer either to his colleagues on the police force or to the general public.” Winnipeg Centre MP Pat Martin expressed concern about the idea of prayer as a crime-fighting tool. “You have to welcome a more enlightened approach to criminal-justice issues, but if anyone thinks the power of prayer alone is going to make our streets safer, they’re deluded,” Martin is reported to have said during a telephone interview from Ottawa.

[Even] the Winnipeg Free Press stated in an editorial “It is understandable a devout Christian would see the hand of God at work in the world that faith would be “foundational” to everything he does. Winnipeggers, however, are equally justified in expecting their new police chief, Devon Clunis, would have a less supernatural plan for battling the city’s ignominious crime rate. “Now citizens are told acting Chief Clunis believes violent crime is not something that can simply be “policed away.” ... But the police chief is not hired to engage in mass invocation for divine intervention.”

For his part, Clunis was understandably disappointed that his attempts to bring the community together were twisted out of context. When asked by Christian Week about reducing violent crime in Winnipeg, this veteran of law enforcement suggested that you cannot simply “arrest crime away.” He followed up with: “What would happen if we all just truly—I’m talking about all religious stripes here—started praying for the peace of this city and then actually started putting some action behind that?”

While eyebrows may have been raised, Devon handled it with the confidence, dignity and class that would become his trademark during his term as Chief. He stood by his beliefs and comments, even taking the time to meet with non-believers about the role of faith in the Police Service and its leadership with the Humanists, Atheists & Agnostics of Manitoba in 2014. He did not apologize for his comments; rather he went on to show over the years how his beliefs and values could bring the community together to tackle problems in a new and better way.

Devon believed in “people first” and the impact we can have within our communities through outreach and education. He engaged with many different faith-based and cultural groups. From the Indigenous, Punjab, Italian, Islamic, and newcomer communities, to the Parliament of the World Religions in Salt Lake City in 2015, he did not shy away from addressing his beliefs, policing issues or the root causes of crime in a public forum.

He put his convictions to the forefront, volunteering his time participating in mentorship



programs, police basketball and bicycle relay teams, “Run with the Chiefs”, and with a Joint-Forces Humanitarian Project to restore a school library and provide educational aid to children in a high-priority neighbourhood in Jamaica.

He was honoured to participate in such events and truly believed that effective community engagement requires the Service to understand all cultures and how interreligious and intercultural dialogue can make a significant contribution to mutual understanding, tolerance and respect. For his faith and community outreach the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba, Janice Filmon, presented Devon with the Award for the Advancement of Interreligious Understanding at a ceremony at Government House on February 7, 2017.

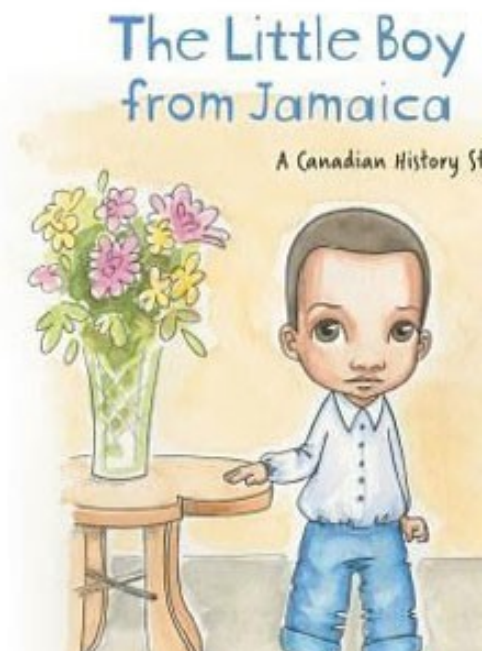
“As a man of unyielding faith, Devon Clunis leads with compassion and integrity and has the gift of being able to unite our community across cultures and beliefs,” Lt.-Gov. Filmon said in a news release. *“His love of all people and non-judgmental approach as a police officer, chaplain, and later chief of the Winnipeg Police Service continues to effect change throughout our community, inspiring us to continue to work in furthering Manitoba as a home for all people.”*

On July 9th, 2016, Devon officially retired as the Chief of Police of the Winnipeg Police Service. As John Maxwell once said *‘that leadership is not about titles, positions or flowcharts. It is about one life influencing another. A successful person finds the right place for himself. But a successful leader finds the right place for others’*.

Devon was both a successful person and a successful leader and I believe he has been a profound influence on the Service, its members and the community during his tenure.

However, Devon has not been idle. Following his retirement, he wrote a children’s book -- The Little Boy from Jamaica -- co-authored with his wife, Pearlene, about his life journey from being a little boy in Jamaica, to the first Black police chief in Canada. He also co-authored a second children’s book with his wife called The Little Girl from Osoyoos, which they hope will help create a socially conscious and aware generation of young adults as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion. He is currently working on book #3 in the series.

He also worked as a consultant for several police departments, sat on the board of the Canadian Police Knowledge Network, and assisted grassroots organizations such as the



Bear Clan Patrol, which has nearly 1500 volunteers who engage in community-based crime prevention drawing on Indigenous values and traditions, by sitting on their board of directors until 2020.

In October 2020 the Ontario government appointed Devon as the province's first Inspector General of Policing. In his role as the Inspector General, Devon will be responsible to:

- Provide oversight of policing in Ontario,
- Establish a modern policing oversight framework for Ontario, and,
- Establish an Inspectorate of Policing, which will work with the government and its partners to develop regulations under the new Community Safety and Policing Act (CSPA).

Under Devon, the Inspectorate of Policing will operate at arm's length from the government to provide policing oversight and ensure that effective policing services are provided to every community in Ontario. This will be done by:

- Monitoring and conducting inspections of police services to ensure compliance with the CSPA and its regulations once the CSPA is in force;
- Monitoring and conducting inspections of police service boards to prevent police misconduct and impose measures where necessary;
- Investigating policing complaints related to the provision of adequate and effective policing services; and,
- Developing, maintaining and managing records, conducting analyses regarding compliance with the CSPA and publishing inspection results and annual reports.

Devon became the role model he wanted to be, he was a change maker – Mrs. Hannah would be very proud. It doesn't matter what colour your skin is, your race, or your national or ethnic origin. I am reminded of the words spoken by the great Dr. Martin Luther King in 1957, and echoed in recent years by Devon "life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

