

Summary of Interview with: Buncombe County Sheriff Van Duncan
Presented by: Sarah Benson and Oksana Wells
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On December 3, 2007, we had the opportunity to meet with Sheriff Van Duncan and conduct an interview with him. The interview was very enjoyable and informative. A broad range of topics were discussed, and Sheriff Duncan was very open in his responses. It was clear that he genuinely cares about the quality of life for all of the citizens of Buncombe County and the professionalism of the Buncombe County Sheriff's Department.

Sheriff Duncan grew up in Spruce Pine, North Carolina. His father was a banker and eventually bought a business which was a country store. Growing up Sheriff Duncan spent time helping his father in the store. Remising about that time in his life, he stated that he learned how to treat people by watching the way his father treated his customers by always respecting and valuing each customer, being considerate, treating people fairly, and being honest. His mentor as far as his law enforcement career is his Chief Deputy Don Reavis who has shown him how to hold people accountable and get employees' attention while at the same time allowing the individual to walk out with a feeling of confidence and dignity.

Sheriff Duncan has a vast experience in the law enforcement profession. He has worked in both municipal and county agencies. He has experience working as a patrol officer, as a detective, and in supervisory/leadership roles to include six years as the Chief of Police on the Biltmore Estate. He has a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from Western Carolina University. Sheriff Duncan was also an instructor at the North Carolina Justice Academy prior to being elected Sheriff of Buncombe County in November 2006.

Following are the key questions posed to Sheriff Duncan and a brief summary of his responses:

- **What inspired you to seek the office of Sheriff of Buncombe County?**
Sheriff Duncan never saw himself as a politician prior to deciding to seek the Office of Sheriff. He realized that change in the leadership in the Sheriff's office was desperately needed in order for the sheriff department to serve the citizenry of Buncombe County in a professional manner. He realizes the importance partnering with the community to accomplish solutions to problems in the community, and he felt that there was many things that the sheriff's department could have been doing in the community to enhance the quality of life for all the citizens of Buncombe County.
- **What do you value most about this community?**
Sheriff Duncan values the generosity of the community. He is amazed by the number of people who are willing to support the community (money, volunteering, etc.) when they think that it will make a difference in the community. This is true in both individual citizens and the business community.

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- What is your vision for the Buncombe County Sheriff's Department?**
 To provide effective and efficient services with the resources that are available; become a community advocate to work with the community to address issues; building partnerships within the community so that the citizens will feel comfortable coming forth with information and working with the department to find solutions to issues.
- As a leader in the Asheville area, if you could influence or make one change, what would it be?**
 Sheriff Duncan was very passionate about his desire to establish the highest standards for the delivery of services from the Sheriff's Office to the public so that the public would never again accept anything less than a professional organization.
- There has been a lot of discussion on consolidation of services in Buncombe County. Do you think that consolidating police services in Buncombe County would work?**
 Sheriff Duncan does not think that consolidating police services would be a positive for either the city or county. He does feel that the city and county needs to move toward working collaborative and strive to work as one force to address issues and accomplish goals.
- What has been the most rewarding/memorable project in the community that you have been involved with?**
 Sheriff Duncan was very excited and proud of the On Track program. The Sheriff Department started the On Track Program in the summer of 2007. This was a camp where officers worked with at risk youths for one week. The kids had the opportunity to meet and get to know officers in the department so hopefully the children had a positive experience with law enforcement.
- What do you think are the top three priorities for our community?**
 Sheriff Duncan feels that the drug problem in our community is definitely a high priority. Drugs devastate lives. Drugs also lead to higher property crimes. Individuals that are addicted to drugs are going to find ways to support their habit and many turn to stealing anything that they can sell quickly so that they can get the drug of their choice.

Sheriff Duncan also stated that he believes that increasing the sphere of positive influence in the schools is a high priority. The need for positive role models and mentoring programs is paramount.

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Sheriff Duncan also stressed the need for the community to come together on issues such as racial issues and immigration.

- **What is your perspective on racism and disparity in our community?**
The entire community must work to relieve some of the hurts to allow for a positive outcome. Everyone needs to come to the table and play fairly.

- **How are most decisions made in our region?**
Many decisions are made when we are in crisis mode.

Unfortunately government moves slow. At times this eliminates our effectiveness. Procurement of resources prior to a crisis would allow for a proactive response rather than just be reactive in the event of a crisis.

- **Collaboration is a must in any community (government and private sectors). Give an example of a successful collaboration in our community that you have been involved in.**
Sheriff Duncan gave the example of how collaboration has worked with the On Track Program. He gave examples of the involvement of nonprofits, major companies, subject experts, counselors, teachers, court system, officers, parents, and the community working together to ensure that the On Track Program will expand to two weeks in 2008 and have a positive impact on the lives of the youths chosen to participate in the program. The stakeholders are engaged and willing to make it happen.
- **Does the local media help or hurt in regional problem solving?**
Both - The media can be an educator of the public. What the media chooses to report has a big impact on the community. There is never any problem as long as the reports are factual. It hurts at times when reporters put their own spin on the facts.
- **The diversity of Asheville has changed over the last ten years. How has the diversity in the Sheriff's Department changed?**
The diversity in the Sheriff's office has not changed at the pace of the community. The department is always seeking qualified employees that mirror the community.
- **What is the Buncombe County Sheriff's Department doing to develop future leaders in the organization?**
The department is committed to leadership training for officers from the top ranks of the organization down to the line officers or detention officers. The desire is to implement a Leadership Academy where certified instructors teach the leadership components. Leadership certifications programs are also being considered. These programs could possibly be considered as a plus for officers in promotional processes.

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- **What are the major problems facing the region?**
Sheriff Duncan reiterated that drugs are a major problem.

Other problems include the rapid growth and the infrastructure issues that we are facing on a daily basis. Education is another issue, because we have to prepare our kids to be able to succeed in a world of ever changing technology. It is also imperative we are proactive in the schools to prevent drug problems.

- **What are some of the major problems facing law enforcement in the region?**
One of the biggest problems is the ability to respond to change. Keeping up with technology is a big challenge. The environment that we work in changes constantly. Dangers that law enforcement officers face have definitely changed with the types of weapons that are on the street. We see kids getting involved in drugs and violent crimes at a very early age.

It is also a challenge to have the ability to communicate with other local agencies with the various radio systems that are in place. It is almost impossible to for the city and county to communicate in a critical incident.

- **The region is seeing a large increase in the Hispanic population. What impact has this had on your agency?**
It has created some problems. Communication is the biggest problem not only on Patrol but in the Detention Facility as well. The department currently has six officers that speak Spanish fluently.

- **Finding good qualified applicants for law enforcement positions is getting very difficult. Why?**
Sheriff Duncan agreed that it is getting harder to find qualified applicants. First of all law enforcement officers are held to a higher standard than other job applicants. The State of NC has strict guidelines as to what is acceptable as far as criminal charges and other standards based on the applicant's background. Fewer and fewer people are tuned into the satisfaction that comes from public service. Individuals are getting more into technology careers.

In conclusion, we really enjoyed the opportunity to sit down and talk with Sheriff Duncan. He was genuine, and is committed to making sure that his agency provides excellent police services to the citizens. He is committed to leading a professional department. He mirrors the Department's Guiding Principles on a daily basis: **Service, Integrity, Professionalism, Accountability, and Dignity.**

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