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Why Is the N.Y.P.D. After Me?

By NICHOLAS K. PEART

WHEN I was 14, my mother told me not to panic if a police officer stopped me. And she cautioned me to carry ID and never run away from the police or I could be shot. In the nine years since my mother gave me this advice, I have had numerous occasions to consider her wisdom.

One evening in August of 2006, I was celebrating my 18th birthday with my cousin and a friend. We were staying at my sister's house on 96th Street and Amsterdam Avenue in Manhattan and decided to walk to a nearby place and get some burgers. It was closed so we sat on benches in the median strip that runs down the middle of Broadway. We were talking, watching the night go by, enjoying the evening when suddenly, and out of nowhere, squad cars surrounded us. A policeman yelled from the window, "Get on the ground!"

I was stunned. And I was scared. Then I was on the ground — with a gun pointed at me. I couldn't see what was happening but I could feel a policeman's hand reach into my pocket and remove my wallet. Apparently he looked through and found the ID I kept there. "Happy Birthday," he said sarcastically. The officers questioned my cousin and friend, asked what they were doing in town, and then said goodnight and left us on the sidewalk.

Less than two years later, in the spring of 2008, N.Y.P.D. officers stopped and frisked me, again. And for no apparent reason. This time I was leaving my grandmother's home in Flatbush, Brooklyn; a squad car passed me as I walked down East 49th Street to the bus stop. The car backed up. Three officers jumped out. Not again. The officers ordered me to stand, hands against a garage door, fished my wallet out of my pocket and looked at my ID. Then they let me go.

I was stopped again in September of 2010. This time I was just walking home from the gym. It was the same routine: I was stopped, frisked, searched, ID'd and let go.

These experiences changed the way I felt about the police. After the third incident I worried when police cars drove by; I was afraid I would be stopped and searched or that something worse would happen. I dress better if I go downtown. I don't hang out with friends outside my neighborhood in Harlem as much as I used to. Essentially, I incorporated into my daily life the sense that I might find myself up against a wall or on the ground with an officer's gun at my head. For a black man in his 20s like me, it's just a fact of life in New York.

Here are a few other facts: last year, the N.Y.P.D. recorded more than 600,000 stops; 84 percent of those stopped were blacks or Latinos. Police are far more likely to use force when stopping blacks or Latinos than whites. In half the stops police cite the vague “furtive movements” as the reason for the stop. Maybe black and brown people just look more furtive, whatever that means. These stops are part of a larger, more widespread problem — a racially discriminatory system of stop-and-frisk in the N.Y.P.D. The police use the excuse that they’re fighting crime to continue the practice, but no one has ever actually proved that it reduces crime or makes the city safer. Those of us who live in the neighborhoods where stop-and-frisks are a basic fact of daily life don’t feel safer as a result.

We need change. When I was young I thought cops were cool. They had a respectable and honorable job to keep people safe and fight crime. Now, I think their tactics are unfair and they abuse their authority. The police should consider the consequences of a generation of young people who want nothing to do with them — distrust, alienation and more crime.

Last May, I was outside my apartment building on my way to the store when two police officers jumped out of an unmarked car and told me to stop and put my hands up against the wall. I complied. Without my permission, they removed my cellphone from my hand, and one of the officers reached into my pockets, and removed my wallet and keys. He looked through my wallet, then handcuffed me. The officers wanted to know if I had just come out of a particular building. No, I told them, I lived next door.

One of the officers asked which of the keys they had removed from my pocket opened my apartment door. Then he entered my building and tried to get into my apartment with my key. My 18-year-old sister was inside with two of our younger siblings; later she told me she had no idea why the police were trying to get into our apartment and was terrified. She tried to call me, but because they had confiscated my phone, I couldn’t answer.

Meanwhile, a white officer put me in the back of the police car. I was still handcuffed. The officer asked if I had any marijuana, and I said no. He removed and searched my shoes and patted down my socks. I asked why they were searching me, and he told me someone in my building complained that a person they believed fit my description had been ringing their bell. After the other officer returned from inside my apartment building, they opened the door to the police car, told me to get out, removed the handcuffs and simply drove off. I was deeply shaken.

For young people in my neighborhood, getting stopped and frisked is a rite of passage. We expect the police to jump us at any moment. We know the rules: don’t run and don’t try to explain, because speaking up for yourself might get you arrested or worse. And we all feel the same way — degraded, harassed, violated and criminalized because we’re black or Latino. Have I been stopped more than the average young black person? I don’t know, but I look like a zillion other people on the street. And we’re all just trying to live our lives.

As a teenager, I was quiet and kept to myself. I'm about to graduate from the Borough of Manhattan Community College, and I have a stronger sense of myself after getting involved with the Brotherhood/Sister Sol, a neighborhood organization in Harlem. We educate young people about their rights when they're stopped by the police and how to stay safe in those interactions. I have talked to dozens of young people who have had experiences like mine. And I know firsthand how much it messes with you. Because of them, I'm doing what I can to help change things and am acting as a witness in a lawsuit brought by the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#) to stop the police from racially profiling and harassing black and brown people in New York.

It feels like an important thing to be part of a community of hundreds of thousands of people who are wrongfully stopped on their way to work, school, church or shopping, and are patted down or worse by the police though they carry no weapon; and searched for no reason other than the color of their skin. I hope police practices will change and that when I have children I won't need to pass along my mother's advice.

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