Hamill: Retired NYPD Chief offers advice for next mayor on police commissioner, stop-and-frisk policing

Former NYPD Chief Wilbur (Bill) Chapman — who has experience with racially profiling — says that police work is a marriage of the two Cs: 'cops and community.' Chapman says before it was called 'stop-and-frisk,' he and his partner stopped and searched people suspected of plotting crimes, and 'the good guys loved us.'

Our next mayor should stop and question retired NYPD Chief Wilbur (Bill) Chapman for some advice before he picks his next police commissioner.

Born in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and raised in Springfield Gardens, Queens, Chapman joined the NYPD in 1968 when the force was only 4% black. From a foot post in East Harlem's 23rd Precinct, he climbed the ranks to chief of patrol by 1995.

"My father was a cop in 1968 when I sat with him and my uncle, who was a minister, watching the riots on TV at the Chicago Democratic Convention," says Chapman, who also served five years as police commissioner of Bridgeport, Conn.

Retired NYPD Chief Wilbur (Bill) Chapman says cops need to be part of the community.

"My uncle called the Chicago cops 'pigs,'" he says. "My father said he didn't understand the pressures of being a police officer. 'Don't criticize a cop until you walk a mile in his shoes,' my father said. So I joined the NYPD and walked in my father's footsteps for 30 years."

The other reason Chapman joined the NYPD had something to do with his time attending the prestigious Newtown High School in Elmhurst, Queens. "I was stopped more than a few times by white cops asking what I was doing hanging around predominantly white Newtown," he says. "They assumed because I was black I couldn't be an honor student there. It bothered me."

Chapman, who has been racially profiled himself, says that there is a proper way to use stop-and-frisk policing without alienating the community.

After graduating, he attended Pratt Institute's school of architecture until he learned that only white graduates were getting architect jobs. "Because I was born with a suntan, I was told I'd be lucky if I could be hired as a draftsman," he says. "So I became a cop."

The first sergeant he served under was named Raymond Kelly. Kelly, now NYPD commissioner, encouraged Chapman to go back to college to scale the ranks.
“In those days, two black guys couldn’t work together,” he says. “But Kelly assigned me to the Neighborhood Police Team, which was the precursor to Community Policing. I worked with a guy named Ray Lopez and our job was to go out on a foot post, suppress crime and establish a line of communication with the people.”

Chapman says he learned the most important element of police work on that beat. “Police work is a marriage of two Cs,” he says. “Cops and community. They can never divorce because neither can survive without the other. Cops can’t function without the support of the community. The community can’t survive without cops. I never forgot that lesson.”

Chapman and Lopez escorted seniors to the bank, befriended merchants, learned who the junkies, pushers, pimps and numbers runners were. “Soon the good people were always glad to see us,” he says. “The bad guys were unhappy when we were out and visible, protecting the good guys from the skels.”

Chapman says that police work is a marriage of the two Cs: 'cops and community.'

Long before it was called “stop, question and frisk” Chapman and Lopez stopped and searched people suspected of packing a gun or plotting a crime. “The good guys loved us because they didn’t want the bad guys around their families,” he says. “You made a real difference in people’s lives.”

Chapman soon became a sergeant, earned a bachelor’s degree in government from Manhattan College and rocketed through the department to deputy inspector, commanding the 81st and 113rd Precincts, and kept rising to chief of patrol. “I served under Commissioner Bill Bratton and with Jack Maple, and I think their CompStat method has its real merits,” he says. “You must hold people accountable for crime in their precincts. But policing is more than a numbers game. You must also establish and maintain the marriage between the two Cs.”

At the 81st Precinct, Chapman started a summer tutor program for kids. “Precinct cops took the kids out to Rye Playland or the beach. Those kids will grow up liking and respecting and maybe even becoming cops.”

He says the next mayor has to reestablish those basic two Cs in conjunction with the third C of CompStat. And still use effective tactics like stop, question and frisk. “Look, I’m not political,” he says. “I’m ecumenical here, on the sidelines, offering advice. If cops know who the good guys and bad guys are in their precinct, they won’t be stopping good people in large numbers,” Chapman says. “Sergeants are crucial. They need to make sure stops are done with courtesy, respect and professionalism.”

Chapman believes that with a 48% minority force there is no reason citizens today should see any color but blue when cops stop them. “The NYPD doesn’t need a monitor,” he says. “If the community and the cops have a happy marriage, they won’t need anyone else but each other.”

dhamill@nydailynews.com

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