

The Guardians: Reshaping History Project and Exhibition

Interview with Sheree Briscoe, 2021

Sheree Briscoe ([00:00](#)):

So my name is Sheree Briscoe. I am a 27 year veteran of the Baltimore Police Department. I joined December 1994 and I am still there. My current assignment, I am a Colonel by rank and I'm the chief of detectives. The role in my family, very interesting question there, the role in my family, I am the middle child of three, so often I grew up with a level of quirkiness, awkwardness, not quite feeling like I fit in. But I am the big sister, though I have a younger brother, I'm the big sister to my older sister. And I'm the one that everyone seems to call when things are going on, life is happening, I'm the person that they call, whether it's my mom, my dad, my siblings, or my cousins and it's a large group of us. Most of my cousins are women, so we do a lot together. We travel together, we are each other's friends. I'm a mother of four, grandmother of five granddaughters. So in the role of family, anchored in many different ways in my motherhood state, if you will.

In community somewhat similar, though I wear a uniform. That's really the attribute I think may seem most relatable is, because I'm brought in that mother figure of, though policing is the profession, human beings, I'm a woman and that's really what exudes beyond anything else, is that attribute about myself, my desire to help people, serve people and motherhood. So I am a resident of Baltimore City. My community is the Mount Washington community. I love it, I was born here in Baltimore, raised here in Baltimore though in my very junior years, my family moved to Atlanta for a job opportunity for my father. I was six months old and we visited three or four times a year. And we moved back when I was in the sixth grade. So I went to Roland Park Elementary Middle, and I went to the Baltimore City College High School, was the high school that I attended, though I did not graduate from that high school. Lifes journeys, I was a teenage mom, so I didn't graduate from the high school. But I still represent that high school as my high school for Baltimore.

Speaker 2 ([02:38](#)):

Okay, thank you. And I guess, describe some of the work that you're most proud of either in your own neighborhood or in all of the work you've done in Baltimore.

Sheree Briscoe ([02:53](#)):

So to describe some of the work that I have been so very blessed to do in the capacity of policing. For all of its controversy, there are still so many genuine stories that are authentic, real, heartfelt and meaningful through this work for me. And that really has been the work of relationship building. So much of policing is defined with a minus, as in taking someone to jail or doing something in that level. And I'm not saying that I haven't had to do those things in the construct of my duties, but what I'm most proud of is relationship building.

Three weeks after the riots of 2015, I became the commander of the Western District where the events and accounts are now depicted in many different fashions in print, in many different ways and with documentary stories. The death of Freddie Gray happened inside of the policing district of the Western District. And three weeks after that incident occurred, I became the commander. And in that time, not fully knowing what to do next, because there just so much hurt, rage, anger, frustration, fear, not knowing what step to take next from the seat of policing. The only thing that I knew to do, was to

reach out from the place in my heart as a human to just share with the community that I see you, I hear you, I feel your pain, because I am a resident of the city, a native of Baltimore and most importantly, because I'm human.

No one wants to have that type of trauma and live through those types of circumstances and not be able to find connection with people, in a way that makes it very real, authentic, that you can do something with all of that raw edged emotion that was showing up. So if I could say anything, what I'm most pleased with, is the fact that we were able to relationship build with some very amazing people. People that will may not ever make a history book, but they're no less famous or no less noteworthy. That to me, has just been the jewel of the work that I've been able to do.

Speaker 2 ([05:09](#)):

Great. And can you describe what some of that relationship building looked like? Or I don't know, is there a story that stands out or a person that stands out?

Sheree Briscoe ([05:22](#)):

Yeah. So that relationship building looked at different points, different ways. There were some days that relationship building was just me standing silent and absorbing the pummeling, owning the fact that, hey, Baltimore Police Department has not always done well or right by its citizenry. Taking on the frustrations and fears and hurts of a community that has been mistreated on various different levels and not served well. And then there were days that I just got to wrap my arms around people and just hold them and tell them that no matter what comes, I'm still here, Sheree's still showing up. I love you, I'm committed. And I can say, I love you to people that I don't know, because I love myself. And I know that I want for my family and I want for my community, the very same things, a healthy community, a loving community, one built of respect. And because of my own faith at work, my own belief system, I can love people that I do not know. And that's how I showed up. And that's how we were able to build relationships.

One of the most notable moments for me, and I'll share with you, when I met one of the other women that you'll honor in sharing this work, was Gwen Brown. She was doing work for BUILD, Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development. They came to the Western District, she and Rob English at the time, he was the lead organizer for BUILD and they came to the Western District. I was literally moving my things into the office. I had not even announced my arrival, here I am, I haven't done an introduction. I'm wearing some capri pants and a t-shirt and I'm moving boxes in. And Rob English stands on the street and he goes into this very aggressive lament about what was expected of me. "We expect you to do these things. We expect you to answer the people. We expect you to lower crime, and we expect you..."

And then Gwen stood there with this look on her face. So I don't know if they knew, and I never asked them that question, if they knew who was commanding the district, they just showed up wanting to speak to the major. At the time by rank, I was a captain, I wasn't the major, but I was sent there to command the district and so I was the responsible person. And she was standing beside Rob English with this look on her face like, "What are you saying?" At that moment, I had not said one word, I listened intensely and I said to him, "Well, thank you. I appreciate knowing your expectations. Just know that they don't exceed the expectations that I have of myself and for my team. But I can appreciate hearing them come in some fashion, from your perspective. What I really want to do and expect, is what the law abiding, tax paying, good residents of the Western District expect of me. That is my priority, though I can appreciate you sharing yours."

And so we ended our conversation on that note. And Gwen was present and I thought to myself, "Sister, who is this man that you are with? And how dare he come up to the Western District and lay down this very abrasive tone of expectation, when he doesn't even know me? Though, I don't have a patch that is riddled in some good history and some not good history, you don't know me." In any conversation you start with anyone, you start on mutual respect. And so from that place, Gwen followed up with... And he introduced Gwen and he told me that she would be my point of contact, the person that I would deal with more often than not. And we were able to lock eyes and have a very innocent exchange that didn't leave me as feeling as bruised in talking to Rob English. I can smile about it, because I don't think he intended any harm. He just really wanted to convey the seriousness of the moment as if for some reason, he fathomed that I couldn't understand that, the complexity of the moment.

Speaker 2 ([09:54](#)):

Tell me how you came to do this work, not just policing, but what drives you to do the work and how do you sustain your energy to continue this work that you do in communities?

Sheree Briscoe ([10:12](#)):

Policing was not my first choice, believe it or not. At the time, I was attending Morgan State University, and there was a recruit drive going. And this was the year 1994 and there was this huge push to get more women to join the force. And Tyrone Kelby was at the time in recruitment. And I remember his name, because I later got to work with him in the Eastern District. He was a recruiter and he ran me down hall and said, "You just walked past my table and I'm talking to you." And I said, "Well, excuse me, you weren't talking to me. You were just trying to get people's attention and you wanted people to join the Baltimore Police Department." I was going at the time, to Morgan for political science. I had an interest in politics, I had an interest in law. And that was the way for me through an encircling black college, to find my way through law. I wanted to do something to advocate for victims.

I had a lot of different issues in my childhood, and I wanted to teach others, learn for myself and then teach others how to navigate the law in the society structure in that way. And so he ran me down and just gave me this speech about how the police department needed me and that I could bring my talents and gifts and resources and join a team and do some of the very things that I wanted to do in the legal field, I could do them through policing. And so I was already a mother, I already had children and it was something about that conversation that we had together and that connection that really attracted me, aroused my curiosity about policing and I joined and never looked back. It was one of the fastest hires from start to finish, it was just over two months from start of the application, to the finish and me raising my right hand and taking my oath. And I've never looked back.

And so I love the way that life just brings you to where your purpose is. And I've been doing it ever since. And I love it, it's my passion, people are my passion. And finding ways to help people is really what I push myself for the most. So there are many different things, after any amount of years of doing anything, whether that's being a student in school or parenting children, or being a partner to someone in life, you have to reimagine new ways to find strength, even in the most difficult of moments to continue to do it. And so with that, I can tell you, God is always brought along people and circumstances to remind me why I am here. I honestly thought that the Western District was the pinnacle of my career, I wouldn't surpass that place, I wouldn't surpass that rank. I wouldn't do anything else, that I would retire from that seat, because that was the dream, if you will.

A rookie officer when I started in the police department, joined in '94, I came out of the academy in '95. My first district was the Western District. I was a rookie officer there, didn't know what

the heck I was doing, leaned a whole lot on all the senior old guys, if you will. And I was able to go back to the Western in 2013 as a Lieutenant and run a shift in the district. And I just remember, especially in 2013, it was tumultuous then. Baltimore was still dealing with crime, but most importantly, drugs and poverty and the precepts that lend themselves to crime. And I just remember thinking, "We're getting this wrong."

And I had an abstract conversation, just talking, saying, "If I ever got the chance one day, I would love to come back here and command this district." Low and behold, only life knew I would get that opportunity. You got to be careful what you speak in to existence if you're not prepared, because it might come to pass. And so I just never thought it, because the Western is one of the most difficult districts to lead, because of all of its challenges, though small, it is mighty and for many different reasons and it brings a lot of violence in that particular 2.8 square miles of real estate. The epidemic of drugs and the level of poverty and disenfranchisement from community members there. So I just had said it on a whim, because I did not like the way we were often guided to do policing. And I'm thinking, "In some way possible, can we just have conversations with people and tell them don't do this anymore? This isn't healthy and find other means and ways to draw to a resolution."

And that takes a level of boldness to go against the grain to do those things. And I'm not saying that singularly, I possess that boldness, but I think I found strength in being okay with getting fired. Somebody had to try something different, because what we were doing wasn't working. And so that's the place that I drew, and I still do draw my strength from, the boldness to say, "It's okay to be fired, doing what I love, especially if it's for the right reasons." And I find that strength through people, God always sends me people to remind me why I'm doing this work, why I have not yet retired, why I'm still here. And it gives me more purpose to my living, because as a parent, you're often telling your children to push for dreams bigger than themselves, be great, do well.

But you show up doing that incrementally, every day being committed, being faithful, being loyal and willing. When I say loyal, not to any one person, particularly, but loyal to the concepts of what is just, what is good, what is right and is important to the people you serve in this context. And so incrementally, you have to show up doing that work every day. See no one never tells you that. They just say, "It's like a fight, you've met your match and it's going to be like this big boom." No big boom. The big boom happens every day you show up, but you got to show up. So I draw strength in that way, from my faith and from the people that I get to meet along the way.

Speaker 2 ([16:38](#)):

And it sounds like, not to put words in your mouth, but that also you're upbringing is something that drives you or that pushed you to pursue some of this work as well. You can talk about it if you want.

Sheree Briscoe ([16:53](#)):

So the things that pushed me or pursued me to do this work in my upbringing, to be honest with you it really has been my family, my children. Most importantly, I became a parent at a very young age and I was an emancipated minor and legally responsible and financially responsible for the choices that I was making for my children. And so to try to model the best parts of yourself, because you're trying to make good people and produce good people to be in the world, that became my drive. I often wondered if my children could see me doing this, would they be pleased? And I asked the same question from a perspective of my faith, "If God, he sees me doing this, would he be pleased?"

And every day I went home to face my family. And if the day wasn't a good day and we talked about it, it was an honest conversation. So in my upbringing, the driver and the push has always been to model the thing for people that I lacked for myself and to model what I want my children to take hold

and root of in their pursuit to live a balanced and happy, joyful life. That there is still beauty and struggle and there is still beauty in being vulnerable, this beauty and honor in not having all the answers and in just pure struggle of life. And we make those things in some way, shape or form such a dirty word, struggle.

But it makes such good outcomes for yourself as a human that ultimately, you want to share that with other people. So if I showed you a beautiful glass bowl, with all this color whole, this is the most beautiful thing I ever saw, and then you drop it and you break it, people often want to discard all of those pieces, because it's no longer whole. And then so for some it lacks its beauty once it's broken, but that's all of us. And so the broken pieces aren't any less beautiful, you've just got to put them together and make something new out of it.

Speaker 2 ([19:07](#)):

That's a beautiful image to conjure up. Thank you. Will you describe your current role for a moment? Tell me again, you have a team of people and your role in the police force is...

Sheree Briscoe ([19:21](#)):

Yeah. So I'm the chief of detectives, so I run the division of detectives. So I have all the specialties, anti-crime, I have homicide, sex offense, more apprehension. I have that body of work now, so there is, though we're getting better at joining some level of human services like advocacy work, the detectives that I lead of that division is largely male dominated. It is less diverse than any other part of the organization, so that brings a whole different set of challenges. I am the first African American woman to reach the rank of Colonel. And I am the first African American woman to be a chief of anything, much less importantly detectives. So oftentimes, they are struggling with what I am saying to them and what I expect of them and how that translates and how I want them to carry out the work.

Because detectives often show up after a crime is committed, after a victim is victimized and then they're working on the investigation. And so their interactions are very different, but at the end of the day, I want them to understand that they think back to the work on the front end as well. And so they have a responsibility to outreach the community, they have a responsibility to share all that they know in an empathetic, compassionate way, seeing all the people. And so they often look at me like, I just want to be the town hugger and to a certain extent it has truth to it, though I understand the requirements of my professional career and what this role holds. I often challenge them to step outside of their comfort zone and do more and better by the people we serve.

I start the day out and I pray before I go out the door and some days I'm just in tears, because I don't know how I'm going to get the point across that what we're doing, isn't working, right? And so getting a case closed is a large degree about trust. People have to trust what they tell you, you're going to do something with it and you're going to be honest and protect their identity in it. And you're going to be honest and protect them in it in some way, shape or form. And you're going to be honest about how you represent what they share with you. And so much about work at this level is dictated by trust and if we don't have trust, meaning you don't have relationship and rapport, it's very difficult to close cases.

So when I'm trying to explain these things to them, they often look backwards and say, "Well, we did it. Say we did it, we closed cases back then. We had a good clearance rate." And I'm like, "Numerically, that may be true, but you literally destroyed all the people and relationships along the way. What was that worth? Was that number so important that it outweighed the person that gave you the information to get that number? No, it's a fallacy of thought." And so not that I don't want to be able to close cases by holding accountable the perpetrator of a crime. I too simultaneously want to do it

without ruining the relationship with community, without severing trust, without creating a larger fracture. And oftentimes, they're challenged by that logic, they think that the two can't exist together. So I don't know if they fully understand what symbiotic relationships mean.

Speaker 2 ([22:46](#)):

So if you could tell a little bit about your hopes for Baltimore, your work in the future, what is your vision? What do you want people to know about your work and about Baltimore?

Sheree Briscoe ([23:04](#)):

I have many different hopes for Baltimore, that's a really difficult question. I have right now, faced with the hope and the prayer that we find other ways to resolve conflict, that we're not resorting to violence and destruction, taking life. I hope that Baltimore begins to find itself investing more in young people, that we can breed the leaders that we read about, right? We can breed and help to mature and nurture our future generations. I hope that we do more to invest in the places that have been overlooked, mistreated, down trodden.

I hope that in some way, shape or form, we're able to knit together as a community and as Baltimoreans, that we're put out of business. I get the need for policing, but I often wonder, is there another way? Because I really want us to be able to provide for, reason with, uplift, educate, comfort, support each other in a way that policing means something totally different and looks totally different than we see it now. That's the hope I have and I really hope to see the embers of that in my lifetime, the promise of that in my lifetime, the reality of that in my lifetime.

Speaker 2 ([24:53](#)):

Well, Baltimore's lucky to have someone like you helping to shape that change right now.

Sheree Briscoe ([24:58](#)):

Thank you.

Speaker 2 ([25:01](#)):

And my role would be to again, just keep telling your story and bringing in attention to the work that you're doing, so thanks.

Sheree Briscoe ([25:11](#)):

Thank you so much. Thank you so much for just taking your time for doing this project of all of the things you could have done, right? I'll share something with you today. I was able to deliver the message at church for Women's Emphasis month. And all I could think about, was that I'm standing in a place in this moment and there's so many women that have come before me and that will come after me. Let me do my part while I'm here. Even if a person never knows my name or any sacrifice that I've made, just let me do my part while I'm here. That's what I want people to know about me, that it's not about the uniform, it's not about the title, it's about the other amazing people that I've had the opportunity, the pleasure and the honor to meet on this journey, that has made for me life in Baltimore better, because of their sacrifice and their willingness to share love even to a person they don't know.