E.L. Miller

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An Interview

On the evening of Friday, October 7th, I sat down with Adam Schniper to discuss his career. Adam works closely with the Pelham police department, but he isn’t a cop himself. Though he used to be part of the force, he is now an “officer” with Compact 2020, a group handling drug-related misdemeanors with rehabilitation instead of jail time. He describes himself as a community resource officer.

In his teen years, he displayed this love of community with his work as a counselor at a summer camp, as well as various jobs in the service industry where, he states, he loved interacting with customers on a daily basis. He mentions the importance of customer service jobs and that they teach you to be more people-oriented, even going to say that “every cop should work in a restaurant at least once in their life.”

While going through police work, Adam learned his strengths and weaknesses. One of his first cases, in fact, dealt with a woman who had crushed razor blades in her mouth. Instead of reacting with violence, Adam chose to speak to her. He asked her questions about her current mental health status and employed de escalation tactics to talk her into spitting out the razors. This was how he learned that police work revolving around mental health was one of his biggest strengths. He states that he always believed that police work should be community based and not violence based. When the opportunity to work with Compact 2020 came up, Adam immediately accepted.

When asked about why he chose this line of work, Adam began to get emotional. He mentions coming from a family of holocaust survivors and his will to give back to America, since he feels they ultimately played such a large role in his family’s survival. Because of this, he has a pride for being American. He states that his patriotism is “not in an extremist way, but in a way in which I recognize how much immigrants give to this community.” After watching his friends victimized many times while growing up in a crime-ridden city, he decided that his way of giving back was protecting that same community that raised him. Growing up in this area, he learned to hate cops initially because of how terribly they treated him and his friends. He didn’t want to be a part of this system. He wanted to change things by being responsive and open to the people he deals with.

His biggest regret throughout his career is not learning how to draw boundaries between work and family life sooner. He feels that, at age 50, he is just now starting to pull himself away from overloading himself with work. His best advice is to carve out time for people in your life, but also time for yourself. Having personal time is the thing that he feels helped him begin to turn his stress levels around.

In December of 2009, Adam’s friend and co-worker, Philip, was shot and killed in front of him on duty. This flipped his world upside down. He felt as if everything in his life had completely stopped. He expands on this idea by saying that it forced him to come face to face with his own mortality. He felt betrayed; that the job he had given his life to was cheating him. For months, he wrestled with hating police work and wanting to quit. He was impacted by extreme PTSD and Depression. He began to self-medicate using alcohol. Eventually, he got himself clean and began attempting to work again because he still missed actively helping his community. He felt that he needed to turn around the bad and make it good. He wanted to ensure that something like that never happened again.

Though he has regrets, he states that he wouldn’t change anything about his past. The good and the bad came together equally to make him into who he is today. And, he wouldn’t change that for the world. Adam believes that having regrets, “though it may make your life feel insignificant,” is a part of living. He ends our conversation by saying that, to him, a life of significance is a balance between community and being true to yourself and your personal beliefs. “To live a life of significance is to be okay with your life being perceived as insignificant by others. As long as you’ve lived to your fullest and felt that you’ve changed the community around you, your life has been significant.”