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RIVERFRONT

A close-up portrait of Sgt. Heather Taylor, a Black woman with long, dark braids. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. She is wearing a maroon jacket over a tan shirt. The background is a textured blue wall.

**TRUE
DETECTIVE**

Sgt. Heather Taylor retired after twenty years with the SLMPD. Cracking the department's racism was her hardest case of all

BY DANNY WICENTOWSKI

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MORAL OF THE STORY

Newly retired St. Louis Detective Sgt. Heather Taylor is one of those rare people in the public eye who lots of people know, but few know much about. That's because she's always been about the work. Whether it was calling out racist cops as the president of the Ethical Society of Police or tracking down killers as a homicide investigator, she kept the focus on the mission. But **Danny Wicentowski's** cover story of how Taylor came to be the police department's conscience is simultaneously compelling and heartbreaking. It'll help you understand why she insisted on crossing the thin blue line when her fellow officers were wrong, why she was never going to back down and why St. Louis is going to miss her so much.

— Doyle Murphy, editor in chief

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STEVEN DUONG

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CORRECTION:

Last week's cover photo should have been credited to Brett Spiller. We regret the error.

CAN'T STOP WON'T STOP EDITION

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NATIONAL ADVERTISING

TMG Advertising: 1-888-279-9955, tmgadvertising.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Send address changes to Riverfront Times, 202 N. 2nd Street, Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63102. Domestic subscriptions may be purchased for 210 \$ monthly (USD add for 4 weeks tax) and \$120/year (USD add \$9.48 per tax) for first class. Allow 6-8 days for standard delivery. www.riverfronttimes.com

The Riverfront Times is published weekly by Euclid Media Group • Hooplied Audio Member

Riverfront Times
202 N. 2nd Street, Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63102
www.riverfronttimes.com

General Information: 314-724-2200

Founded by Ray Hartmann in 1977



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TRUE DETECTIVE

SGT. HEATHER TAYLOR retired after twenty years with the SLMPD.
Cracking the department's racism was her hardest case of all

BY DANNY WICENTOWSKI

In her final hour as a St. Louis homicide detective, Sgt. Heather Taylor stands in the shade of the World's Fair Pavilion in Forest Park. She is surrounded by blue uniforms, though she's gone casual to her own retirement. Her long maroon cardigan swishes freely, unencumbered by a gun belt. Her feet are tucked into a pair of non-regulation Chuck Taylors. Her hair, worn in a cascade of braids, would never fit under a uniform hat as required by the police manual.

For the past twenty years, she's served the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, much of it as a homicide detective. But as the public face of a police association for Black cops, Taylor has spent the past six years walking a far different kind of line than the stark blue border so commonly splashed across hats and flags.

It's a line she began following long before she put on a badge. And today, on a windy Friday morning, she's going to finally walk away from it.

"My main goal," she remarks as she arrives at the September 25 event, "is to try not to cry."

She'll fail, but she won't be the only one. Of the 30 uniformed cops in the audience for this "Final Roll Call," many are members of the Ethical Society of Police, one of two police associations representing cops in St. Louis. The associations have had, at best, uneasy relationships since their respective origins in the late 1960s. Ethical was officially recognized by the department in 1972, its founders Black officers inspired by the civil rights era. Four decades later, as a new civil rights era arose in St. Louis, Taylor became Ethical's president.

Taylor is deceptively soft-spoken in media interviews, but, for the first time on the record, she spoke at length to the *Riverfront Times* about herself, including her improbable journey from a traumatic childhood in north St. Louis to the murder scenes that filled her nights as a detective.

As president of Ethical, or ESOP,

Taylor's voice pierced the blue wall of silence in ways no one could ignore. In 2016, when she called for then-police chief Sam Dotson to resign, she released a 112-page report to back up the group's charges against the department's racist internal policies. In 2017, she publicly denounced the police killing of Anthony Lamar Smith and called for a guilty verdict in the case of the officer who killed him. She called racist cops racist and put them on blast on Twitter. She didn't let things slide.

Once, when a CBS News reporter asked her if there were white supremacists in the department, she responded immediately: "Yes."

While making a habit of breaking the blue code, Heather worked a long career in that very department.

She was tasked with closing murder cases, a rare justice in a city where witnesses are often too scared to talk and roughly three-quarters of all killings go unsolved. But witnesses talked to Taylor. She solved cases. In 2012, she became the department's first Black woman to make detective supervisor as a sergeant.

The retirement ceremony marks

the close of both sides of Taylor's unique career, one that traversed the lines between cop and activist, authority and watchdog. In her honor, and for the last time, those sides are coming together.

On the pavilion's perimeter, next to a table decorated with balloons and individually wrapped cupcakes, an animated John Hayden, the city's police chief, mingles with other attendees. He rises to the podium as the "Final Roll Call" rolls through its first speakers.

"If I were to describe who Heather is, in our community, what she represents is inconvenient truth," he tells the crowd. He jokes that he wishes he could call their relationship "mentor-mentee," but he adds, "We argue quite a bit."

He's not the only chief to do so. As he addresses the pavilion, he obliquely references his predecessor, Dotson, who retired under pressure in 2017. In Hayden's telling, Dotson had tried to put Taylor in her place.

"The previous chief didn't like that inconvenient truth," Hayden continues. "He told her, 'You need to pick your battles.'"

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Between roles as homicide detective and ESOP president, Sgt. Heather Taylor often found herself in opposition with her own department. | DANNY WICENTOWSKI

stances." According to reports at the time, hundreds of "dissident" white officers reacted in protest, demanding the suspended officers be reinstated and that the board break its own rules by allowing officers to form their own police association. At one meeting, 600 officers reportedly supported a motion for "an epidemic of sickness" if the board did not comply.

In a matter of weeks, the police board relented. It reinstated two suspended detectives and lifted disciplinary action against four officers. The SLPOA was born soon after.

But Black St. Louis cops had been spurred into action as well. On January 7, 1969, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* first reported their efforts under the headline "Negro Policemen Plan to Form Own Group." The story quoted a Black patrolman who dubbed the nascent SLPOA a "white police officers' group" whose "racialist" members supported the pro-segregation presidential run of George Wallace, far-right conspiracists of the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan.

Some 30 years later, when Heather Taylor entered the department's police academy, the divisions in the department were just as clear. The evidence distressed the idealistic former basketball player.

"I noticed that right away," she says. "Blacks sat with Blacks. Whites sat with whites. When you're an athlete you sit with everyone. Where I'm from, you pass the ball to whoever is closest to the basket, who's ever open, if you want to win."

It wasn't just the seating arrangements at lunch that concerned her. Over the weeks of training, she grew frustrated with the way her instructors and fellow recruits described the city and people she would soon be serving. She recoiled when she heard white classmates offhandedly describe the Black Panthers as a terrorist organization. ("I looked at them, like, 'You don't know anything,'" she says now.)

She found herself thinking: "These are the people I have to count on, and we can't even get ourselves together about simple stuff!" It was in the academy that Taylor started earning the reputation that would follow her for the rest of her career. One day, she says, she "snapped."

"I complained in front of the whole class and instructors," she recalls. "I told them, 'We can't be divided. If we're going to go out, I'm supposed to rely on you to protect me and save my life. And we can't even get along?'"

Taylor considered dropping out of the academy, but the next day she was back at her seat, a familiar mantra in her head: "I'm going to push on. I'm going to change it. I'm going to do better."

A police department, of course, is not a basketball team. Unlike hoops, police work is governed by the chaotic referees of St. Louis' geography and population. The court is a nearly 50 percent Black city whose violence falls along the same footprint as its history of poverty, segregation and redlining. Taylor noticed that the department's command ranks and specialized units were overwhelmingly white. When she started talking to other Black officers, the advice they gave her was grimly straightforward: When, not if, she confronted racism at the department, don't expect the St. Louis Police Officers' Associa-

The divisions between the city's two police associations couldn't be more stark. The St. Louis Police Officers' Association is currently defending five officers charged by federal prosecutors in the beating of a Black officer working undercover as a protester during a 2017 demonstration. The beaten officer, Luther Hall, is represented by the Ethical Society of Police.

tion to back her up.

That's where the Ethical Society of Police came in. It was a lesson she learned quickly.

She remembers, "You knew in police academy there was a Black police association and a white association, with different reasons why they existed."

It wasn't just racism that challenged her. On her very first day on duty as a sworn police officer, Taylor sat down at her computer — and was startled to feel the hands of a male sergeant rubbing her head and neck. She remembers jolting away and telling him, "Don't you touch me."

"He said, 'Oh I thought you were someone else,'" she recalls. "I knew he was full of shit all day. Who does that? I had to work with that sergeant. This is what they don't prepare you for."

Heather Taylor's first assignment landed her in the old District 3, a beat covering a chunk of the central corridor south of Highway 44. She started with small drug cases

— "the most pettiest crimes," she calls them now — busting suspects with a few pieces of crack.

"I didn't make a lot of drug arrests in my career," she says. In her first years, "I made a lot of stolen car arrests. Violent crime was my push anyway."

She was learning other lessons, too. While in her first assignment, Taylor recalls a white sergeant attempting to compliment her after overhearing the rookie cop on the phone. The sergeant's choice of compliment, "You're so articulate," was one Taylor understood to include the unspoken code "for a Black person."

Taylor says she tried to gloss over the incident. But later that same month, she says she was back on desk duty and talking with a white lieutenant. Their conversation turned to an open position in the South Patrol's de-

partment and child abusers. While some of the crimes left her feeling sick, she was doing exactly what she'd always imagined cops should be doing: holding people accountable for their actions. Helping the victimized. Serving justice.

In November 2012, she joined the homicide division's night shift. She estimates she investigated 400 murder scenes over the next eight years, a timeframe that saw the city's annual homicide count climb to the 200s, the highest they've been in a generation. People killed each other out of passion, anger or for seemingly no reason at all.

Some cases went cold, others led to convictions. But on some level, she admits, she never understood them.

"I had a case where a sister murdered her brother over referencing Nicki Minaj as a whore. She stabbed him. Her brother died a year later," she says. "I can't fathom it, picking up a knife, let alone being my own brother. I can't fathom any of my homicide scenes. Someone taking a samurai sword and slicing someone up in a house in south St. Louis? I can't."

What she could understand, after years of lessons, was the police department. She'd learned that people do things they think they can get away with. She made sure the officers around her understood what she would not tolerate.

Clarence Hines spent 21 years as a city cop, including time in the anti-crime unit with Taylor in the early 2000s.

"When I first met Heather, I honestly feel like she was in the process of becoming the Heather that we know and see right now," he says. "I think she was really looking for her voice, maybe even with some trepidation, wrestling with this idea of what is true justice, what is truth."

He adds, "I think we've all been there. Some never get past that hurdle."

Hines retired in 2012 to open a ministry and volunteer his time at Ethical. By then, Taylor had joined the association's board for a few years. She even ran for president of the organization in 2013, but was defeated by an officer who would loom large in ESOP's future.

After losing the election, Taylor took a break from the Ethical board. In 2014, she was still working murders as the rest of the city slept.

That year, however, her integrity as an investigator, and her sense of true justice, would be tested in a very different way. Not by death or

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HEATHER TAYLOR

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But there's a problem, as Hayden explains, with trying to tell a person like Taylor to turn down a battle worth fighting for.

"Heather only knows the truth," the chief says. "What she also believes is that the time to do the right thing — is right now."

In 1973, one year after the founding of the Ethical Society of Police, its future president was born in the Ville neighborhood of north St. Louis. Heather Taylor was the youngest of five, her father a chef and her mother a homemaker and custodial worker. Her older brother, Diamond Slater, was her best friend.

"We were extremely close," she says in an interview, one of several with the *Riverfront Times* in the days leading up to her retirement. She rarely talks about this part of her life story, the heartache of it, the loss. But to trace the steps that led her to the city's homicide division, you have to start at the beginning of her relationship with the police. Diamond was the first chapter in that relationship.

"He was getting into trouble, always running from police or police were showing up at the house," she recalls. "We grew up knowing that not all the officers were bad people, but some of them were, some of them were racist. It was still a noble profession."

Sometimes, the police did more than just show up at the front door. When she was ten, Taylor remembers watching two officers force their way into the family's home while pursuing Diamond for his latest lawbreaking: theft of an ice cream.

"They didn't have a right," she says now, though of course the officers did it anyway. Taylor says one officer clasped handcuffs around the wrists of her seventeen-year-old older sister for the offense of talking back.

Taylor had grown up respecting police. Her cousin had joined the city's department, and Taylor remembers liking how she looked in uniform; she imagined how it would look on her. Despite the violation of her home, she says the incident didn't alter her aspirations — she still considered it "a noble profession."

By the time Taylor started high school, her best friend and brother was still getting into trouble. In 1983, when he was sixteen, the trouble was much worse than stolen ice cream.

Taylor sighs.



Taylor's "Final Roll Call" ceremony drew some 20 officers, as well as St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney Wesley Bell. "She looks you in the eye and she tells you exactly what she's seeing," Bell said in his remarks. | STEVEN BOONING

"My brother had killed someone, literally a block away from our house," she says after a pause. "My mother found him, cornered him and turned him in. It was a difficult time, a very difficult time. He was essentially my only friend, and he's gone. This big piece is gone."

There was no question of trying to protect him, Taylor says. Her mother made that clear: "He had to be held accountable for what he did." And he was: Diamond was charged with second-degree murder and certified as an adult. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Taylor and her family struggled to move on.

"I was lucky enough to have a friend who had a basketball hoop," she says. "It took my mind off it."

The sport helped her become the first person in her family to attend college. In 1992, Taylor, a six-foot-tall forward, enrolled at Southern Illinois University Carbondale on a scholarship to play Division I basketball. She was still trying to decide between joining a police department or enlisting in the Marines.

During her sophomore year, she got a call from home. Her aunt, Denise Stith, had been dating a St. Louis deputy marshal named John Parker. Around 7 a.m. on April 3, 1993, Parker came home, got into an argument with Stith and shot her in the head with a .38 pistol.

Again, Taylor's family life had been overturned by violence. Her

coach urged her to go home for the season. Parker was arrested and charged with manslaughter, but Taylor says she later learned from the family's attorney that he was released just three years into his twelve-year sentence.

Two killings. Two convictions. Two systems. It was a lesson she never let herself forget.

"What happened wasn't right," she says now. Her aunt, she adds, "was pretty much the fighter and leader of our family." The family was never the same. Neither was Taylor.

"My brother got 25 years for something he did, and you have someone in law enforcement who only got three," she says. "Three years for just destroying our family, and he gets a slap on the wrist."

Taylor returned to college but says she was "still in a haze" after her aunt's murder. She kept playing basketball but dropped out of college before finishing her degree. She returned to St. Louis. Along the way, she met the man who would become her husband, a recent veteran of the Gulf War who urged her to reconsider a career in the military.

On September 11, 2000, Taylor took her seat on her first day of the police academy. She'd join the "noble profession" that had taken her brother away in the name of justice, the same profession whose status had seemingly protected her aunt's murderer from

facing the same.

"It made me want to become a police officer even more," she says. "I just had this unbelievable belief that I could change it."

It is often said that St. Louis has two police unions, one white, one Black. This is, confusingly, both accurate and inaccurate.

While the department officially recognizes two police associations, only one — the "white police union" known as the St. Louis Police Officers' Association — has a seat at the table when it comes to contracts and collective bargaining on behalf of the city's current force of some 1,200 uniformed cops.

Meanwhile, the Ethical Society of Police counts 372 dues-paying city officers, most of them Black. The scope of representation is limited to legal and internal disciplinary cases. However, both associations are roughly the same age, with the SLPOA arising in 1968 as part of a blue backlash to the suspension of a group of officers who had brutally beaten two members of the Black Liberators militant group that September.

The beatings led to an eruption of protest and drew crowds to the home of Mayor Alfonso Cervantes. Weeks later, the state's Board of Police Commissioners, which controlled the department, ruled that the officers had violated police policy by using "greater force than required under the circum-



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HEATHER TAYLOR

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violence, but betrayal.

In late 2014, the president of the Ethical Society of Police was a cop named Darren Wilson. No, not that Darren Wilson. The other one.

There are, in fact, two of them in St. Louis law enforcement. That summer, the release of the name of the officer who had fatally shot Michael Brown led internet sleuths to initially misidentify the actual shooter, Ferguson officer Darren Wilson, as St. Louis city officer Darren R. Wilson, who happened to be the recently elected president of ESOP.

It was an almost comic mishap at a time of community anguish and national scrutiny for the area's law enforcement. As the news spread, ESOP attempted to clarify that its unfortunately named president was not the same man who had pulled the trigger. The clarification itself sparked national stories about the ordeal of Wilson's mistaken identity (which had triggered, of course, a tsunami of harassment and death threats).

But later that year, Taylor started getting calls about Darren R. Wilson that had nothing to do with his name, and everything to do with his leadership of Ethical.

One caller asked about missing lease payments for ESOP's office space. Another was a florist waiting for an invoice to be filled. There was a call from Charter about the group's outstanding payments for its internet service.

"They asked why they weren't getting paid," she recalls. "A couple months later, we found out about Darren and what he was doing with the money."

It turned out that Wilson had run a side business as a local comedy promoter, supporting his hustle with \$81,000 he'd drained from the Ethical bank accounts. Taylor says she reported him to the police department's Internal Affairs Division and helped build the case against him. In March 2014, the department suspended him without pay. One month later, a federal grand jury indicted him on nine counts of wire fraud.

It wasn't just the money for Ethical. As a police association that historically struggled to assert itself against the department and the larger SLPOA, Ethical now found itself with a president who had flouted the law and stolen from fellow officers. (When the news of the prosecution broke, the SLPOA, perhaps recognizing an opportu-

nity to finally corner the market on police associations, reached out with an offer to "absorb" Ethical and its members, Taylor claims. She says she rejected the offer.)

While Ferguson's Darren Wilson never saw the inside of a courtroom, ESOP's Darren Wilson was charged and eventually pleaded guilty. At his sentencing, Taylor submitted a victim impact statement and asked the judge to throw the disgraced officer in federal prison for twelve months. Outside the courtroom, she told a Post-Dispatch reporter that Wilson was "a clown."

"We held him accountable," she says now. "What one person did, it did not reflect on all of us."

That may sound like a version of the "one bad apple" argument — a point often raised by police officials in attempts to separate themselves from the abuse wrought by one of their own. It's an argument that implicates the individual, not the system around them.

But Taylor isn't like other officers. Appointed president of Ethical after the scandal, she set to reshaping the group's status in the city. No longer would Ethical sit on the sidelines, quietly supporting officers in legal issues and sponsoring social events. Instead it would be loud, and argumentative, and demanding. It would be a systemic change, one instantiated in Taylor's voice.

Going forward, Taylor's ethics — and her combativeness — would lead the way.

In April 2016, Morley Swingle joined the St. Louis City Circuit Attorney's Office. A veteran prosecutor in rural Missouri,

Swingle's first city murder case summoned him to the scene of a shooting. It was 2 a.m., and he recalls that rain was pouring down on him as he introduced himself to the detective supervisor on the scene.

"Heather Taylor was the first homicide sergeant I met," Swingle says. "And while we were at that crime scene, we heard a gunshot that occurred on the next block. It was a second murder at another crime scene."

Swingle had spent nearly a decade as the prosecuting attorney in Cape Girardeau, where, he says, "we had maybe four murders in a year."

"So, we had two in one hour in my first call," he says ruefully. "That was my introduction to working homicide cases in the city of St. Louis."

Taylor impressed him. She was "indefatigable, an Energizer Bunny, and very persuasive." He saw

in her a "natural curiosity" that seemed to guide her to the right hunches, the right doors to knock on. She found witnesses who had every reason not to talk — but they opened up to Taylor. Often, Swingle says, he would reach out to her with thoughts on a new angle for an investigation, only to find Taylor was already on it.

"The nicest compliment you can give a homicide detective," he says, "is that if I were to be murdered, I would want Heather Taylor investigating it."

Taylor wasn't just turning heads in the circuit attorney's office. By 2016, her ascension to the top of the Ethical Society of Police had produced its first major action: a "no confidence" vote directed at police Chief Sam Dotson. That summer, Ethical released a 112-page report, co-authored by Taylor, exhaustively detailing the frustration experienced by the department's Black officers. The report read like a case summary, detailing incidents of alleged retaliation, unfair disciplinary policies and missed promotions. The department could talk a big game about diversity, but the report contended it pooled police resources in whiter areas of the city, primarily downtown. The group argued that the department's promotions system had come to be defined by a racial barrier that prevented Black officers from moving to the higher ranks.

Taylor was blunt in a press conference at the time. "We hope Dotson resigns or is fired," she said.

Her hope would come true with the election of St. Louis Mayor Lyda Krewson, who announced on her first day in office in 2017 that Dotson would be retiring.

By the time of the chief's departure, Taylor and Ethical were preparing to weigh in on the upcoming trial of a white former officer, Jason Stockley, who had shot and killed Anthony Lamar Smith in 2011. Although years had passed, Circuit Attorney Jennifer Joyce charged Stockley with first-degree murder, a crime no St. Louis officer had ever been accused of in the city's history.

Taylor hadn't worked the 2011 shooting as a detective. But internal rumors about the incident — particularly Stockley's aggressive tactics and his penchant for carrying an unsanctioned AK-47 Drago pistol on duty — had percolated through the department for years. By the time Stockley was charged with murder, reporters had published videos of the in-car dashcam that had captured Stockley telling his partner "I'm going to kill this motherfucker," minutes before he did just that, shooting Smith, a



Retired St. Louis police officer Clarence Hines watched Taylor develop her voice. | DOYLE MURPHY

father of a young daughter, five times through a car's driver-side window.

Stockley had his supporters. The St. Louis Police Officers' Association paid his \$100,000 bond and mounted his legal defense with the union's lawyers. They argued that he had feared for his life after spotting Smith reaching for a revolver on the passenger seat.

The SLPOA's message was what it had always been: It would have its officers' backs, no matter what policies they may have violated or tragedies they escalated. Taylor says its position, and particularly its use of members' dues to pay Stockley's bond, "was disgusting."

Stockley's trial lasted seven days in early August 2017, and then it was left to Judge Timothy Wilson to make a decision. On September 12, while St. Louis awaited a ruling, Ethical released a video in which Taylor addressed the murder charges against a former fellow officer.

Like a detective, she analyzed the available evidence. And then she delivered a verdict.

"There were several things we found alarming," she said in the video, "that violated policy that led us to believe that his actions were that of someone that had committed murder. He wasn't defending himself in the line of duty."

In Taylor's perspective, Stockley was undeserving of the loyalty of the St. Louis Police Officers' Association. She'd watched the dashcam video showing Stockley and a partner chasing Smith by car, dangerously weaving through traffic as they closed in. Stockley's outburst on the dashcam appeared to show his premeditation. A bystander's footage of the scene's aftermath, which emerged

in 2016, set off further alarms in her detective instincts: Stockley claimed Smith was reaching for a revolver before he shot him through the driver-side window — but after the shooting, Stockley had recovered the revolver without wearing gloves, contaminating the evidence with his DNA.

In fact, only Stockley's DNA had been detected on the revolver. This was the conduct the SLPOA sought to defend.

At trial, prosecutors emphasized the single source of the DNA and attempted to argue that Stockley had planted the weapon to cover up a murder. But on cross-examination, the case was ultimately shaky. The seemingly damning evidence was steadily weakened by expert testimony from the department's forensics investigators. The fact that Stockley had touched the revolver barehanded violated policy, but it also accounted for his DNA on the weapon. It didn't prove he'd planted it.

The case, as so many police shootings do, came down to Stockley's claim that he'd acted "out of fear for his life." On September 15, 2017, three days after Taylor called for Stockley's conviction, Wilson returned his verdict: not guilty.

"I think Judge Wilson is a coward," Taylor says now, pointing out that the judge retired almost immediately after finishing the case. She maintains that Smith was murdered. She's still disgusted by St. Louis Police Officers' Association's role in supporting Stockley's defense. She doesn't see loyalty in their blue code, but blindness.

"That thin blue line is there, yeah, but that doesn't mean you can't cross it," she says. "And you should cross it. You have to."

It is September 25, 2020, and Heather Taylor is crying.

After retiring, her plan is to attend law school in Florida, but she still needs to say goodbye to a lot of people at the World's Fair Pavilion.

"I love so many of you," she tells the masked crowd of officers and ESOP members. The audience has moved inward, standing now nearly shoulder to shoulder in two groups on either side of the retiring homicide detective. One by one, she addresses officers by name: the commanders who believed in her, her classmates from the academy, the next crop of leaders of Ethical. She thanks them. She tells them she loves them.

There are important people in Taylor's life missing from the crowd. The ongoing pandemic kept her parents at home, while her cousins watched via livestream. But under the shade of the pavilion is her brother, Diamond Slater, the beloved sibling who spent most of his life in prison for murder before his release in 2008. She thanks him, too. She speaks of their separation and how it "pushed me into this field."

"Most of all," she continues, "for our aunt, who's not here because she was killed by law enforcement. Aunt Denise, I'm here because of you."

These are losses that will never leave her. In the crowd is the mother of a murdered seventeen-year-old boy whose case Taylor spent years attempting to solve, but could never close. It's one of a number of cases that still bother her. That includes the killing of Kervin Harris, who died in 2012 after he was put in a chokehold by a St. Louis police officer while a second officer tased him six times. Harris' death became one of Taylor's homicide scenes. According to the police report, a witness claimed they heard an officer calling Harris the n-word as the 39-year-old was being choked out. Taylor submitted her case to the circuit attorney's office for criminal charges, but they never came. The officer who choked Harris remains on the force.

In some ways, not much has changed for Black officers in St. Louis in the past twenty years. The department remains roughly 30 percent Black, though not for lack of interest. A 2019 report on the department's minority recruitment (conducted by the FUSE nonprofit at the behest of the city) faulted "barriers" in its hiring practices, noting that "diverse applicants apply more than white applicants" while at the same time

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HEATHER TAYLOR

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"the demographics of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department do not reflect the communities in which they serve."

And the divisions between the city's two police associations couldn't be more stark. The St. Louis Police Officers' Association is currently defending five officers charged by federal prosecutors in the beating of a Black officer who was working undercover as a protester during a demonstration against the 2017 Stockley verdict. The officers' text messages revealed giddy excitement over the opportunity to "whoop some ass" on their protest detail. The beaten officer, Luther Hall, is represented by the Ethical Society of Police.

But there are signs of change. At Taylor's retirement ceremony, standing to her right is St. Louis County police officer Shanette Hall. In June, St. Louis County Executive Sam Page signed a memorandum of understanding that officially recognizes the Ethical Society of Police and its 65 members in the St. Louis County Police Department.

Taylor, holding back further tears, locks her gaze on the younger officer in the black Ethical Soci-

ety polo.

"Shanette," she says, "I see so much of you, of who you are, in me. I'm worried" — her eyes move along the line of uniforms before her — "I'm worried that this struggle will be difficult for her," she adds. "I need everyone here to lift her up."

Finally, Taylor addresses Chief Hayden.

"As a mentor, I'm proud of you," she tells the chief. She tells him that she supports him, even if at times she disagrees with him "most definitely."

"I know it's been difficult," the sergeant tells the chief. "Sometimes we've made it difficult, those of us who wear this uniform," she says, and adds, "both Black and white."

It's time. The officers in the crowd turn the volume down on their radios as Taylor calls into dispatch for a "68" — police code for "out of service."

"4215 ..." she says into the radio, her voice traveling out into patrol cars and precincts.

"Everybody, stay safe, be fair, take care of each other and our community."

Over the radio, the voice of the dispatcher crackles in response.

"4215 ... Heather Taylor, 6009 ... is 68 for the last time."



A line of officers and friends hug Taylor at the end of the retirement ceremony. Taylor plans on entering law school to become a civil rights attorney. | DANNY WICENTOWSKI



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