



Recorded Events

A Place for Us: A Celebration of West Side Story, with the 5th Ave Theatre

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[00:00:23] To learn how you can help the library foundation support the Seattle Public Library go to foundation.spl.org. My name is Orlando Morales and I'm director of

[00:00:41] Education and Engagement at the 5th Avenue Theatre and I'm so grateful to be back here at the Seattle Public Library and on behalf of the 5th Avenue Theatre. Thank you so much Bob and thank you to the staff at the Seattle Public Library for hosting our community conversations. We look forward to this. Each one of our shows we're able to come here into this space and have special guests give us context for the shows that we are about to see and also host any conversation that we do have. We want to have surrounding these these important works of art that we have at the 5th Avenue Theatre. So our first guest today who I'm really excited to have with us is somebody who is no stranger to the theater community. Please help me welcome Misha Berson. If you're not familiar with Misha she is, or was the chief theater critic for The Seattle Times for 25 years. Check that out, twenty five years. Now you're a freelance writer and a teacher and but your work still appears in The Seattle Times.

[00:01:43] Yes. And in Crosscut and place in American Theater magazine all these places other publications and you've written four books which I'm sure all amazing. But today we're really interested in one of your books which is called Something's Coming, Something Good: The West Side Story and the American imagination.

[00:02:00] Yes. And you can find a copy in your local library because the library system here bought quite a few copies.

[00:02:08] We wanted to bring a copy down but they're so popular that they're off the shelf, they flew off the shelves.

[00:02:13] Oh, I am happy to hear that.

[00:02:16] Oh well why don't we start off by. Tell me about this title for this book. Right.

[00:02:20] Well you know the West Side Story is the product mostly of four real geniuses of the American theater and music world and one of the things that I realized when I was writing this book and talking about how it all came together and what these four men were doing is that it's not a book just about gang activity and 1950s which is you know the time that they wrote it. There was a lot going on in the city of New York at that point. There were rumbles you know gang fights on the streets young people were really getting hurt. But it's larger than that because it's based on Romeo and Juliet of course a story that has lasted through time for more than 500 years.

[00:03:14] And, it's a, it's a story that is a an imaginative work so you can take it at almost any time in our history and it still feels very vital.

[00:03:28] It's interesting to think that the imaginations that this book that this play in this musical came out of where the imaginations of people who are just kind of getting started in their theater careers. Right.

[00:03:39] Well. Some of them were Stephen Sondheim who is a very famous now composer and lyricist. This was his very first Broadway show. He wrote the lyrics to the music. Leonard Bernstein was becoming the conductor of the New York Philharmonic. Jerome Robbins was already working on Broadway. And Arthur Laurents had written some important movies but it was the sort of combination you know how the chemistry works in the arts if you have the right people together something special can happen and that that's what happened at first what they wanted to do was they thought they would set Romeo and Juliet in New York at a time when Catholics and Jews were living kind of in close proximity together and they had that idea and they wrote songs and they wrote you know some script and and really worked on that and then they realized wait a minute this is not what is going on anymore. A lot of people don't even remember when that was happening and there were weren't you know a lot of Jewish gangs and Catholic gangs. So they kind of put it away and said well you know maybe we'll get back to

it. And then one day Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents were sitting by the pool in Beverly Hills they were both working on movies and they saw a headline about Latino warfare between gangs in southern California down in L.A. where they were. And they both looked at each other and said wait a minute. This this is perfect. Why don't we do it about the Puerto Rican community in New York which was growing very important community a lot of migration into New York City and the European American kids who were upset about their turf being disturbed by these this influx of Latino kids. So that did it. That was the spark and they decided we're gonna go with that.

[00:05:51] It's so interesting that we start off with a song Somewhere and they say the famous line that it starts with there's a place for us. And I kind of growing up being like Oh yeah that's kind of like the love song of this this show. But I've come to kind of understand it's like the entire play for me is everybody's thinking about a place either defending their turf or place or like trying to an imagined place that they're trying to create or get to or run away to or even kind of an imagined America that that some people are discussing or dancing about. I guess during that American number I guess. So it's interesting that that even right off the bat that first the first scene in West Side Story we see that turf battle in that battle over place.

[00:06:41] That song Somewhere by the way has been you know the score for West Side Story hatched many hits that became part of you know music that still endures. So the song Maria and tonight tonight won't be just any night.

[00:06:55] But, that song Somewhere has been recorded the most independently of any song in the show and it has a kind of really deep meaning for a lot of people. For instance it was someone came in to a prison in England and wanted to do the show there for the inmates. And that song resonated so deeply for everybody in this jail. And it's it's you're right it's about you know finding some place of refuge someplace safe and some place where people can get together and get past their prejudices and you know really be at peace with each other.

[00:07:42] And so that is still I think a very powerful message in that song which is performed all over the place and I should say it was it was kind of great watching these kids from Kent West Side Story is performed every year by high schools around the world. I have a funny little Facebook page you can look at called West Side Story Book and I put up clips and I have you know young people singing it and Polish and Romanian and then in in Japan and China. I mean it's being it's done everywhere and it still really resonates with with young people everywhere.

[00:08:23] I think during our research in the Education Department we came across a German production that took place in outer space. I'm not sure NTI caught wind of that one but so there is a chapter in your book that's called. We Got Troubles of Our Own. You kind of start to look at West Side Story is setting up setting the stage for musicals about you third youth angst or problems later on.

[00:08:51] Yeah. So this was really one of the sort of breakthroughs of West Side Story was that this was the first big musical about young people that wasn't you know kind of sappy Moon June thing you've got to sort of if you can think back to 1957 when you probably weren't around the shows that were popular then were very upbeat like the Music Man was one and My Fair Lady.

[00:09:16] And this was a show where there was a battle on stage between young people who you kind of grown to know during the show there were people lying dead at the end of the show.

[00:09:28] It was a more tragic thing but it was also about young culture you know young people and you know it was a big thing that for example the dancing which is very exciting and West Side Story was done by kids work by dancers wearing jeans and tennis shoes instead of ballet shoes and tights. So there was there was that there was this youthful energy and I personally don't think that there would be there would have been shows like Hair and you know you can kind of go on from that there. There's a number of youth oriented shows Spring Awakening, Hair that are about kids who are in that time of adolescence when you know things are really changing and difficult and emotional and often there's some tension between either certain kinds of classes or races or you know just ethnic groups. So. To me this is the launching pad for those shows that are about young people.

[00:10:42] Why did you kind of come. Going back to just the fact that you decided to write a book about this this this topic this play like why why this musical. What about this musical really spoke to you is it kind of that youth kind of focus already but what kind of inspired you to be like. You know I really need to dig into this and open this up for the world.

[00:11:03] Well I discovered this from the cast album when I was a little kid and at the beginning of my book I talk about how I'm with my cousin Rachelle in her bedroom and we're playing West Side Story. And I think I wanted to be Riff and she wanted it to be Tony and we we did the whole thing right. You know I don't I don't know if any of you have done that with Hamilton or something where you take all the parts and you pretend to be the characters. But right away I loved it and I especially love the music and I was just enamored of that show as

many people I think young people of different generations are. But I got. And of course I'd seen the movie and let's say the movie has got you know been all over the world the movie is one of the most popular movie musicals ever made at one ten Academy Awards. You know I mean it's it's a big deal. But where things change a little bit for me was actually at the Fifth Avenue so I had seen a couple of live productions of West Side Story. And to do this show well you have to have superior voices. You have to have people who can really dance. I mean the dance has to be great and you have to have actors who can really mope and make it feel real what goes on with these kids falling in love being torn apart by by all of this. tension. So I'd seen a couple of productions they weren't that good and I thought well you know maybe it's one of those shows that sounds great on the on the album but it's not so hot when you actually see it. And then I saw the 5th Avenue Theatre production in 2007. And I'm not just blowing smoke here. You know I believe me I wouldn't.

[00:12:58] I wouldn't call this out if I didn't mean it but that production and I think there's gonna be some similarities this time though with a whole different cast had a very large cast. It had a full orchestra of about 25 instruments which you really need for this magnificent music. It had the dancers from dance spectrum which is a great local dance company and it had performers who could really handle it. Who could really do it. And I was blown away. I thought OK. This is what impressed so many critics on opening night in 1957. This is why this show began its life as a legend and I thought oh boy you know I'd love to dig into this find out all the stories behind the stories what the show means. And it turned out that I found a publisher who was very interested in my book because 2011 the year the book came out was the fiftieth anniversary of the movie. So it was you know with synchronicity things just fell into place. I wanted to do it.

[00:14:14] My other books were about you know Asian-American theater and and other subjects but so I really lived with West Side Story for a couple of years. And since then of course I've seen many productions and I'm looking forward to this one to this one that's coming up at Fifth Avenue.

[00:14:37] A lot of pressure. What is one thing that has really surprised you that you've learned about this musical juju in your research period. Was there anything that that really kind of like oh just resonated with you or or just took you back a little bit.

[00:14:54] I think what surprised me is that it was so kind of radical and revolutionary but that the year it was premiered and up for Tony Awards you know the big Broadway awards it lost to the Music Man and The Music Man is you know a delightful show Fifth Avenue and many other theaters do that show frequently. It also had a great movie that people loved. But I was just kind of shocked in a way that you know here was this show that was so different and brilliant and maybe that's why it didn't win more awards and it it only won awards I believe for the

choreography and for the performance by Chita Rivera who plays Anita the head of the sharks gang's girlfriend. I think another thing that surprised me in a kind of less happy way was that Jerome Robbins the director looked very hard to find Latino performers to play the sharks. He really wanted Puerto Rican or kids who came from Latino backgrounds. And he's I think you know people have dissed the movie a lot because there is a lot of brown face in that movie they're just white actors who are wearing brown makeup. But he tried. He went all over the city. He went to dances he had auditions. And the sad thing was at that point there were so few opportunities for young Latino performers for training for working that there just wasn't enough of a talent pool for him to choose from. And he did what he could. He did have some Latino actors in the cast but you know now this is one of the great things the Fifth Avenue can put out a casting call and they can have make sure that all those sharks are familiar you know with their own Latino backgrounds. And I think it makes the show richer.

[00:17:06] Yeah it's interesting that we're in that time where we have that over the years I wonder if it's because of the show you know the existence of this show gave some opportunities and paved some paths for poor Latino performers along the way. And that's one of the reasons why we're able to do it as well.

[00:17:24] Yeah. Yeah that's that's really true and everybody knows you know Hamilton now Hamilton is such a big thing and that's I think that's the the youth show of this generation. And I interviewed Lin-Manuel Miranda who was the guy behind Hamilton and the lead actor and I said you know how to.

[00:17:45] How do you feel about West Side Story and how do other Latino performers feel about West Side Story. He said Well we have kind of a love hate relationship with it. But if you walk into any dressing room where there are a bunch of Latino actors and you start whistling America or something like that everybody chimes in.

[00:18:08] So yeah it did provide an opportunity for entry way because the show has been this will be next year will be the fifth time it's revived on Broadway and it's been done. As I said on many tours summer stock there have been international tours that go everywhere you know from Asia, Israel, and the UK. So it has that possibility to hire a lot of young Latino actors and that's that's really been helpful I think to a lot of careers.

[00:18:43] You spend some time talking about the movie in your book. And when I watch that movie I'm realizing that there's shooting actually on the streets of New York. Did you find any interesting tidbits about how that all went down.

[00:18:56] Yeah. So that the show takes place in Midtown Manhattan in an area that was very rough called Hell's Kitchen and just north of Hell's Kitchen in the West 70s area. There were a lot of tenements and a lot of poor people had lived in that neighborhood and they were basically tearing the whole thing down to make way for Lincoln Center the big Performing Arts Center. And somehow this was absolutely perfect timing. And Jerome Robbins and Robert Weiss who co-director the film were able to get permission from the city of New York to film the opening scenes of the show.

[00:19:40] On the streets of New York. And it's really interesting when you watch the movie because you'll see it looks like there are tenements there and they're just facades of buildings that haven't been entirely torn down. And then there's a scene where there this is at the opening scene the really great opening scene. They're running around chasing each other. And at one point they're throwing rocks at each other and where they're doing that is a construction site. So they filmed for a few weeks there in the heart of Manhattan it was summer it was in the 80s 90s it was terribly muggy and it was a very very difficult shoot. And Robbins was this perfectionist who made everybody do things 20 times and then said Well why don't you do it try it on the left foot now and set the right foot. You know he he was he was a taskmaster but he got what I think is one of the most exciting dance sequences in in film that opening sequence. Also some of it was filmed on some playgrounds in Spanish Harlem which is up on the east side. So they were really able to use New York most of it however was was shot in studios in L.A..

[00:21:02] Does anybody have a question for Misha about West Side Story.

[00:21:06] Yeah. It took about ten years because there was that long pause where they thought OK forget it about the Jews the Irish Catholics were not going to do that. And. then they reconvened. So between the idea the original idea and the opening that was about a decade. And anybody who has you know done creative work knows it just sometimes it happens that way doesn't all just come together instantly. Also during those ten years these four guys all of them were really busy. They were doing other shows writing other musicals creating ballets. I mean you know they were out and about doing a lot. So it wasn't like they were just waiting around for inspiration.

[00:21:57] Yeah. That's a really good question and I think it it enriches what you're doing if you have a reason and I think you know sadly but true we're not past the kind of situation that you see in West Side Story. We're not past those conflicts. In fact the whole question of immigration. Puerto Ricans are of course American citizens which a lot of people don't realize.

In fact they're that song America. Puerto Rico's in America is one of the lyrics but it was a migration from Puerto Rico which was desperately poor and people just seeking a better life with their families and other people who were also financially challenged feeling very threatened by that. Well you know what's more timely than that right now we're going through this with not so much Puerto Rico though. The earthquake made a lot of refugees. But what's going on with Latin America. Immigration. And so those those kinds of conflicts in our democracy are still you know very strong. And also even though I think we're much more open to the idea of blended identities and intermarriage which is a much more prevalent thing than it was in the 1950s it still is challenging. There are places in the country where it's still extremely challenging. And so those things are still alive and also in this show. The young gang members are asking themselves what is America all about what's in it for me Why can't I have a good life. You know what am I supposed to do to make my life meaningful and good and so that you know I think there are still millions of people that feel that way. So in addition to all the great music and the dance and the love story which is you know the love between people who it's forbidden is is a plot that's always going to endure. I think those sociological things are still very relevant.

[00:24:18] It was actually a Jerome Robbins and he was oh here's the story. Who knows if this is true for those of you who are too young to have seen him. There was a great movie actor named Montgomery Clift and he was a close friend of Jerome Robbins and he was studying at the Actor's Studio and he's asked Jerome Robbins would you coach me. I want to do a scene from Romeo and Juliet. Please help me you know coach me. And he did that and he got very involved with that text with Romeo and Juliet and very enamored of it. He had worked with Leonard Bernstein before on a show called On the Town and began to talk to him about that. Then they brought in Arthur Laurents and then later much later they brought in Stephen Sondheim. So Jerome Robbins and the and the I always say the ironic thing about Jerome Robbins is that he was a very difficult person he was a real ego maniac and a taskmaster. But he was very brilliant and he. That vision of the show was in large part his especially at the beginning and the movie, not every aspect of it, but a lot of it is his vision. And he got fired in the middle of the shooting because he was spending too much time and too much money and it's just ironic in the end he and Weiss shared an Oscar for the terrific show even though he was fired. And the sad thing to me is here's this movie that's considered such a great movie despite you know some casting issues and stuff and he never directed another film. And I think that is so such a loss that that here is this great man of the theater who also was on his way to becoming a great filmmaker. And you know that was it. That was the end of his career.

[00:26:22] Well I wish there was some way we could download everything you know about West Side Story but they're actually kind of is.

[00:26:28] Right. You have your book. Right. And so we know that the copies at Seattle Public Library are checked out but Amazon is the Amazon Barnes and Noble you know pretty much anywhere. But it's right there. And thank you so much for spending some time with us today to get ready for upcoming production and to remind us that we have this amazing reference out here for us to learn more about West Side Story and uh yeah I guess we'll see you at opening night.

[00:26:58] Yes definitely. Thank you for inviting me.

[00:27:01] Please help me thank Misha. Thank you so much.

[00:27:05] Misha is actually going off to a speaking engagement and going to be speaking about West Side Story. So let's do it. Thank you again Misha. So our second speaker today is somebody that I have been privileged to get to know just recently through an education program that we have had here at the 5th called The West Side Story Project and this is where we were able to put young people teenagers in high school in contact with law enforcement officers through the Seattle Police Department and tasked them with going through the themes of West Side Story finding something as as Misha had pointed out. Some of those themes that still speak to us today and ask those students to start to imagine how they could inspire their peers to start to address some of those issues. So one of our guests today was instrumental in helping us get that off the ground for the first time in 2007 and was instrumental again in helping us do it again this year. Please help me welcome Assistant Chief Adrian Diaz from the Seattle Police Department as well. So Chief Diaz for more than two decades has been committed to building relationships across of all Seattle's diverse communities and has been the architect of several citywide youth violence prevention initiatives. As assistant chief for collaborative policing you have been driving prevention and intervention and restorative justice and community engagement and initiatives and also ensuring that community outreach is the heart of the Seattle Police Department's mission. Thank you for being here today.

[00:28:45] Thank you for having me here. I'm excited. This is actually back in 2007 when the first West Side Story Project came about. We had a town hall very similar to this and twelve years later I spoke at that one and 12 years later I am speaking at this one as well. So thank you and thank you for having me here as well.

[00:29:04] So I just want to kick this off with actually a question from our youth advisory board. So we had a youth advisory board working with us on the West Side Story Project and unfortunately they all it's AP testing time, I guess. So everybody is out. But they did did it forward a question to kind of kick things off. This is a question from a student named Diego.

And so Diego points out that in West Side Story the relationships with the police and the portrayal of the police isn't necessarily the most positive. Right. And we have instances of police who are kind of acting negatively towards young people, are discriminating against Latino youth in that movie. And it is pivotal to the plot but I just am curious as you as a police officer working in community policing how do you react to that.

[00:29:56] Actually this movie are this theatrical really covers a lot of topics in there that are all true today. The issues that regarding immigration song America to gang once a jet always a jet to the officer Krupke key scenes and the police youth relationships so all of these same topics that this was discussed in the 50s are all still the same topics that we discussed 70 years later. And what I find very very similar to what our youth are experiencing back then is very similar to what youth are experiencing now and the distrust that they have for police officers. We are trying to work and do a variety of different things to kind of build that trust and actually having that discussion and dialogue over theatrical theme or themes in certain plays are very very powerful because you start to learn and understand where people's thoughts are. And so having a discussion about people's experience with police officers whether it's good or bad having the experience of where their families have also had experiences as well that have kind of shaped their opinions is also been powerful for us. We want to continue to run more programming and more engagement because for us it's really about relationships. Everything in life that we do whether it's business world whether it's in our own just work environment it's about relationships. And once you get to know somebody once you know how they think or tick or maybe you might not agree with them but you will understand them and you'll appreciate that understanding.

[00:31:31] You might like I said you might not agree but you'll find ways to say OK I understand where they're coming from and at least I can have a conversation and I might try to change their opinion but at least that conversation is ongoing. And so really that's what the West Side Story Project brings out is the conversations to having with youth with officers to really having those difficult conversations because officers get uncomfortable when when youth ask great questions like that officers are gonna be a little out of their comfort zone because they're not expecting those hard questions. And so it's really good for the officers to get out of their comfort zone. But it's also good for the youth to just hear what the officers are gonna have to say. I try to tell youth at one point we were youth as well and we had our own experiences growing up which shaped as some of us were drawn to police because of how we had a bad experience with officers. Some are drawn to police because they just wanted to do you know good for the community and some are drawn to the police because there is a sense of power that you have you might have and that is the officer that we don't want. And so we know that there are ways that draws officers to it and we've got to figure out how we can actually continue to build on and on those relationships.

[00:32:46] So in 2007 when we did West Side Story Project for the first time was this like one of many things that you did with theater and performing arts or you know to be honest we've never used Performing Arts up and up until that time.

[00:33:03] And I just you know felt now we could actually use Performing Arts for a variety of different discussions. We had a conversation regarding Hana's Suitcase that came around a couple of years ago that was based on the Jewish Holocaust and a suitcase that was given to a Japanese Holocaust Museum and then somebody started kind of getting out to the who the owner was. And you start to realize like there is so much discussion that can happen in conversation about history and how it can portray for how police were involved in that history whether it was good or bad. And so I just honestly never thought that theater could actually play a big role in opening up conversations with a lot of different you know opening up difficult conversations I should say. And that's that's what I'm finding a lot more that there is a lot more to discuss.

[00:34:03] So what did it look like in 2007 when you walk into this room and you went to theater kids.

[00:34:10] So we actually brought it so a lot of our programming is really on the foundation of trying to get an adviser a youth advisory group together youth actually want. We want youth to drive the program. And so we we did that back then we actually had the one youth advisory group was off kids that were around schools that have theater programs which was kind of the higher I mean I would say the higher end schools but the schools that had a lot more money invested into the school environment and then we actually brought in youth that it had that we worked with and in some of the schools like Chief Sealth, Rainier Beach, Cleveland high school that didn't have a lot of money invested in those schools but they had a lot of violence that they saw every day that they experienced the trauma of shootings that happen in their community. And so to bring the two groups together and start that conversation about the themes of the play and once you start talking about gang violence and you know you had kids that were theater kids that had experience did not have that experience and having that conversation with kids that had shootings that happened around their corner of their house every day or prostitutes walking right by their house.

[00:35:24] And you know we we've dropped off a couple of the kids and they were literally right at the corners of the violence. That was that was occurring. And for them to explain what they experience on a daily basis open the eyes of everybody. And so that is a great way to kind of start the dialogue in there that that started the conversation we would then watch snippets of the movie where we wanted to figure out what themes we were going to draw from and to start that conversation. And then at that point we wanted the youth to participate as the facilitators

because nothing's more and more powerful than having a youth facilitated discussion. We had them facilitated with an officer as well. And so that. that conversation really kind of drew a lot more out of the youth than we were expecting. And we we held actually we did a middle school and we did a high school workshop. So we did two workshops for two different age groups. And it was just a powerful experience. And so so yes we we loved it and we when this came around 12 years later we were on board again to try it out again our summit this year was on May 2nd.

[00:36:39] This is one of our youth facilitators who is amazing. We see the police officers sitting back and participating. What I loved and you started describing that activity were they. They look at a scene in the movie and then everybody gets up and kind of re does the scene but tries to improvise an ending that's more equitable and is more understanding. So kind of using the movie as a jumping off point to kind of be like okay this is something that didn't really go the way it was. And I think that is interesting how this youth advisory board was very astute in saying OK. So West Side Story is very much just failures of communication between adults and students or between peers it's just people aren't able to talk to each other or interact in an equitable way. And if they were able to do that we wouldn't have the movie because everybody would just be like Oh OK. But it was interesting to see students and police officers play that out and actually use theater to reimagine how those interactions could actually happen.

[00:37:41] So what he was also describing is a time where we actually create what we call. Role reversal. So we switch, the officers become the youth, and the youth become the officers. So the officers get a good perspective of how the youth are going to perceive what their job entails and then the officers are going to act out like the youth and go gosh I told them what to do and they didn't listen to me. Why don't they listen to me and that's some of that's real world experience. And so having that switching that roles can be a very very powerful opportunity for people to learn and understand each other.

[00:38:15] So taking a step back community policing what does this actually mean for you and your mission and what does it look like to have officers under your jurisdiction. Who's that's their mission is to be out in the community are there other programs like this that I'll do so.

[00:38:34] My bureau I started actually I was promoted to the assistant chief about six months ago. My bureau has really gravitated to the philosophy of what I believe policing is about which I talked about already is relationships. So we call it relational policing model and what we're focused on is building a long term relationship. That means that all of our programs are going to run about six to eight weeks. We want to at least be able to capture 16 hours to 32 hours of continuous contact with the officer and the youth or adult that we're working with. So we run a program called The Immigrant Family Institute. It's eight weeks. They spend five hours with

each other for eight Saturdays that we have 15 officers that are working with the 18 families. There's a total of once you can bring them all together is about 85 people that are in the same room. We do a peacemaking circle process to start off our day and to close our day. So we want to make sure it's a culturally responsive program as well. And it gets officers in all 15 officers were on patrol so they were literally officers that are going to respond to that 9 1 1 call because what we want to do is get them experience to the families that they're going to be responding to for the 9 1 1 service.

[00:39:52] And so by building this relationship when they respond to that house they're going to understand some of the cultural aspects of it but they're also going to understand just having a little bit more energy because they've had conversations with those families. And then the families are learning from what the officers' expectations are when they respond to that household what things that they're going to be asking questions about. Noah you know this is for investigation purposes is not to dwell into your family in a personal life but it is really for us to investigate certain aspects of a crime. And so having those conversations having that understanding really helps us build a relationship. We run mentorship programs we're running anything from athletic programs from t ball our baseball to to soccer to flag football right. Different programs but all of the programs are going to run at least between 16 and 32 hours of contact. So that way they establish a relationship with an officer and we're bringing officers from all over the department to help us have that interaction because we want to get them out of patrol because every day they see a lot in their patrol experience and they're seeing a lot of trauma in their patrol experience.

[00:41:05] And we kind of want us to have them step away at that times and realize like this is the community you're serving and we want you to have some really positive good interaction with that community rather than always having to respond to when things are in crisis. And so part of it's also healing for the officer. You want to create some level of healing for officer because I can tell you it's not an easy job. I know of an officer that has worked for me in the north in that in one year has had to respond to two different instances where the person involved was literally decapitated. And so can imagine having to have it see that trauma and see that experience and having that officer and they're going to end up responding to multiple calls and we're expecting them to literally go back out and go and handle another call and not realize that the experiences that they have are going to play a role in how they respond.

[00:42:06] And so we've got to also make sure there's a wellness component for the officers as well that that hey realize that. Let's take you a little step out back and let's just have you have fun and have a good experience with the community that we're serving.

[00:42:19] It was interesting getting teenagers in the room with your officers and kind of just opening up the dialogue about well what is the first thing that's making you a little bit anxious about this this experience. A lot of students of color that were in that group and they spoke to you know well it's just there's a fraught relationship the dynamic between youth and police it's still a little dicey. So what do you think are some of the biggest obstacles right now that you see and that we need to address you know every day is an opportunity for us to have a good interaction.

[00:42:55] When you walk by an officer sometimes they are focused on what their job is. And sometimes just saying hello and a smile can go a long way because sometimes it's like I said you have a variety of different things that you've seen in your career. It's not always easy to do this job. And so having an opportunity to have people's you know be nice and end it. But on the other side we also have to get officers to really take a step back and say Look I know you've seen a lot in your career but all your community really they they they trust you. They would not be able they would not call 9 1 1 if they did not trust you enough to know that you were going to respond when they're in a time of need. And so we have to build that relationship that relationship is ongoing. It continues on every single day every contact is an opportunity for a good positive contact an opportunity like this morning. We rewarded a young girl that was in elementary for what we call public safety. She was one of those traffic monitors in our school. And we went to the school and every kid I passed out probably a hundred fifty stickers but they just swarmed us. And it's a school that's in South Park which is a very diverse school but it has a majority Latino population in the school. And when I saw all the kids swarm us you know number one there is a chief who's a black female myself as the assistant chief. You know a Latino male. And so they see officer are they see a representation of themselves. So that is a big role. And what we also need to also be mindful of is that the command of a police department has to represent the community it serves.

[00:44:40] And so it just happens that you know our chief is black. And it just happens that I'm Assistant Chief that a Latino. But it is also being mindful of look for the communities that want you know to build that trust.

[00:44:53] They have to see somebody that looks just like them as well. And so that is something that we are really trying to ensure that we're pushing that we give the right education internally for our staff.

[00:45:06] Does anybody have questions. Oh well we have two with about the West Side Story Project or about community policing.

[00:45:14] You know I've actually seen not just the article but even even just movies. There's a movie that I think is really powerful called Higher Learning. It's back in the day with Ice Cube and some of the same themes come and resonate in the discussion of race. They dealt with it when it came to security of the school. But I felt like it played a role in policing as well. I believe that crash has a lot of themes and around race and community. So there's you we can use a lot not just a theatrical but even movies everyday movies that we experience that brings out a certain theme to just create that dialogue and conversation. I think honestly it's part of it's getting people out of their comfort zones and having discussions about topics that are just not comfortable with when it comes to race. It is not a very comfortable topic. And I think if you can have use as some sort of play or a movie or theatrical aspect to actually create that conversation it can be very very powerful because it can be in a safe in a safe place. I've actually use Higher Learning because I think that that has some really good discussions because it has black white supremacy. We're experiencing extremism at a higher rate as of the last probably two or three years especially and what I mean extremism we're seeing nationalism white nationalism as becoming a very big part of a variety of our communities. We're not we haven't seen it in Seattle as much but we're still seeing it. It doesn't go away. And so bringing those topics up even in a progressive city is something that we have to push for.

[00:47:01] I liked Higher Learning as one of the areas in there to have conversations around so our Youth Advisory Board also brought up a recent movie called The Hate U Give which is in a book too. I should say the interactive to both as a book and a movie and then they also when they created their facilitate their discussion of America the America scene and West Side Story also brought in a recent song called This is America by Childish Gambino known as a hip hop artist that the kids. Yeah yeah and that that kind of enriched that discussion as well. So that was kind of cool thing about this summit is the mixing of Leonard Bernstein and yeah. Yeah and Childish Gambino.

[00:47:43] Is a question. Yes.

[00:47:47] So when I started working in this environment in community policing probably about 13 years ago there was just two of us doing the work and I came from a tactical background. So my experience was I worked in a street level narcotics team did a lot of undercover a lot of warrants a search warrant type work. So I had a very good reputation of my tactical experience. And so when I started doing this work people kept on telling me is that isn't police work that is not police work. And 13 years have passed. I now have a bureau that's over 85 officers and civilian staff. So I've gone from two to now 85 and we have contracts with our downtown emergency service center for our mental health providers. We have contracts that we have with reach. We have a variety of other things programs that we are running in there and officers have been embracing it and we're getting more and more especially younger officers because younger officers see this as as the avenue to really have an opportunity to

really do what they set out to want to do and that was make a difference. They see it very tangible when kids are coming up and giving them hugs and literally you know wanting to spend time with them and I mean that the immigrant family too literally one of the kids was the hold on to the officer's legs like I don't want you to go. And so that experience is really changing the younger officers' mindsets into it.

[00:49:17] But I mean like I said it I went from two to now. Eighty five people in it. It is. And there is a there is a cultural change that is occurring in this process. I now have about 60 officers that want to come into my units and so I'm very lucky to have the opportunity to really try and build something that hadn't been built before. But it is also growing pains too because you're building something that hasn't ever been tried before and the road has never been paved.

[00:49:49] And so I'm learning that process as it goes as well because you're looking for funding you're trying you know how do you continue to run all the stuff that you want to run and you need all sorts of things. You know for food because food is like the the great opportunity to have a sit down discussions and and so you have to have you have to find ways to really incentivize the conversation sometimes so moving the planning the youth summit with the kids in there and then your officers and then your officers kind of prompting that.

[00:50:19] We're gonna talk about food. We got to talk about breakfast and lunch because there's gonna be an important part of the day to build community. I think it's also interesting that the community engagement in the police department parallels some of the growing community engagement movements that are happening in nonprofits and the performing arts as well that we can't just be an organization who's you know talking down from an ivory tower is that we have to realize that we are part of the community and if we don't build relationships with the people right there around us like meaningful equitable relationships then there really is no future and there's no there's no place you know for all of us and I would agree I think most of the time we if we just stayed in our own box we would not get half the stuff done.

[00:51:07] We had to partner with people it's what community policing is all about. There's three elements of commune Policing Partnerships problem solving and organizational transformation ideas is that we've got to change the culture of the apartment to really embrace going out and doing some problem solving work. But we've got to set up partnerships to help us problem solve. And one of the problems that we have is is that our community does not always feel safe. It does not always feel like it's being treated equitable. And we've got to figure out ways that we can do that and we can embrace that.

[00:51:40] What is your favorite part of West Side Story?


[00:51:43] You know I actually like the song America. I just I think growing up I grew up in Orange County. I was I was born in Santa Ana California and I'm growing up and I always say like being a body kid or being a kid that where we call Chicano I call Chicano. And my mom would be like note that that and that meant that you were less than and that was like it was kind of derogatory. But I go No Chicano is like that's American born with Mexican descent and that was like California and I would have this big arguments about with my mom my mom about it. And and I actually met I was majoring in American ethnic studies Chicano studies to be exact. And so I would have these big fights with my mom about what title I could actually call myself. And so when you when I heard the song America I like that resonates because I was born here but I am proud of my Mexican descent. And and so I think that that kind of talks about like how do we make it. When I look at my family my my family came from there were farm working so my dad migrated through through the system. My aim came through Granger. And we were during picking seasons. My mom came. Her family worked on the railroad and so I see that kind of family as like we were. We were around America since its inception in there but sometimes you don't always get treated equally. And so I find that song very close to my heart in there. But. One of the things I also talk about is that you know we're like for my kids my kids. They all have a darker skin tone and my by my skin tone and I. But they're going to have opportunities that I didn't have you know. And so it's really trying to get them to understand what those opportunities are so they can become better than I am. And and so that's what you're always pushing for for your kids and stuff. So yeah I really like that song.

[00:53:43] I don't realize you're American Ethnic studies have something in common there.

[00:53:49] Well Chief Diaz thank you so much for joining us tonight. And thank you for helping our theater kind of connect the ideas in West Side Story to our community and to really push our students to think about how to take the ideas and West Side Story and actually apply them and to make our community a better place. Thank you so much for being with us.

[00:54:10] Well thank you. Thank you as well.

[00:54:13] And thank you to everybody that braved the rain and the traffic to be out here for another community conversation. This is the last one of our season so we'll look forward to posting up our calendar for next year. But just at the end of the season thank you to Bob. Thank you. Here at the Seattle Public Library. And thank you again for hosting us. We'll see you at the next one.



[00:54:37] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

