

The Power of Perception

As I write this article, news is breaking that six Baltimore officers are being indicted on charges related to the death of Freddie Gray while he was in police custody. I am reminded of other young black men whose names have been in the news lately—Trayvon Martin, Walter Scott, and Michael Brown. While each of these cases is distinctly different, all have a common underlying catalyst that cannot be ignored.

Some argue the catalyst is ongoing racism in law enforcement. Others maintain there is no problem—just a lack of respect for police officers and a misunderstanding of the use of force. As a former cop and prosecutor and current criminal defense attorney, my experience leaves me with some strong

personal beliefs about what is responsible for these events. Yet, one doesn't have to believe that there are major problems to realize there is a need for major changes.

Whether or not there is a real problem is of little consequence because we can all certainly agree there is a very real division in our communities based on a vastly different *perception* of law enforcement. If the rule of law is to succeed, the people governed by the law must have faith in the fairness of both the system and its application. Many in our country, rightly or wrongly, perceive the system as unjust. Whether that is true or not does not matter because that very *belief* is enough to tear our communities apart.

TYLA cannot take a political stance. Yet, what TYLA can do and will do is exactly what is needed. In a bipartisan, multiracial, and multi-socioeconomic way, we will open channels of commu-

nication and engage the issue through education. Along those lines, we will begin development of the following projects this month:

People's Police Guide—A small handout that will educate the public on proper police procedure, the history and reasoning for certain police tactics, policies that are consistent with both community-oriented and problem-solving police models, and what citizens can do to assist local law enforcement in their efforts to be fair, efficient, and professional.

Town Hall Meetings—Gatherings between local law enforcement and local minority leadership, whose purpose is not to take sides but rather to allow people to discuss in a moderated fashion different views of the same problem and to impart an understanding of the basis for the differing views.

And Justice for All: Preventing Wrongful Convictions Through Education—A training block that will feature interviews with prosecutors, defense attorneys, and exonerated individuals and will present the top 10 things attorneys on both sides can do to limit their chances of participating in a wrongful conviction.

When I walk out of office in a year, we will not have solved the racial tensions in this country or convinced everyone to believe in our justice system. However, we will have opened lines of communication, learned to understand each other better, minimized the chances of wrongful convictions, and made a significant and positive impact. I need your help in this journey. Please email me at barrett@blanchardthomas.com if you would like to participate in these projects.

C. BARRETT THOMAS

President,
Texas Young Lawyers Association

