

Transcript of Interview with CJ Willingham by Travis Gunnells

Interviewee: CJ Willingham

Interviewer: Travis Gunnells

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Location (Interviewee): Greensboro, North Carolina

Location (Interviewer): Columbus, Mississippi

Transcriber: Travis Gunnells

Abstract:

CJ Willingham was born in Framingham, Massachusetts and grew up there before moving to Greensboro, North Carolina. Where she is currently serving as a Police Officer with the Greensboro Police Department since 2018. CJ currently lives in Gibsonville, North Carolina with her spouse Katlin Greene. CJ also is a Technical Sergeant for the Air National Guard of North Carolina and her occupation in the Guard is a Security Forces member. She has served as an Air National Guard member for nine years and has deployed several times overseas. CJ was recently deployed to the Middle East when the COVID-19 pandemic started. She shares her experiences of witnessing the pandemic start from a far and reflects on the protests events that occurred while she was deployed. CJ also highlights the effects of the protests currently (Member of her Departments Riot Team) and her perception of how the George Floyd incident should have been handled. She also describes her views of police brutality and the ways police reform could work.

Travis Gunnells 0:15

And it's recording. I'm Travis Gunnells, student at Arizona State University. I am doing an oral history interview with CJ Willingham. It is for the COVID-19 archive.org. A Journal of the Plague Year, a collaborative effort for archiving events during the pandemic year. So we'll get in with introduction—introduce—introducing CJ. So just give us like where are you from originally? Where you're from... what you do now and stuff like that?

CJ Willingham 0:57

I'm CJ Willingham. I'm 25 years old. I was [audio cuts out] originally, and now I live in Greensboro, North Carolina where I am a civilian law enforcement officer.

Travis Gunnells 1:14

I know that you—what else do you do for occupation?

CJ Willingham 1:18

I'm in the Air National Guard as a security forces member.

Travis Gunnells 1:22

Okay. And how long have you been a police officer?

CJ Willingham 1:25

Been a police officer for two years.

Travis Gunnells 1:29

How long you've been in the Air National Guard?

CJ Willingham 1:32

Nine years.

Travis Gunnells 1:36

So... getting into the topic. COVID-19, it has been a big year for that. Just the initial effect, tell me how COVID initially affected you when it started? Where were you stuff like that?

CJ Willingham 1:55

So when it initially started, I was deployed to the Middle East, and at the time, we didn't really know a whole lot about it just because access to the United States and other places wasn't really—we didn't really feel the same effects that people in the US did with like all the panic buying and stuff like that. So initially it was just kind of- it's like Coronavirus was mentioned on the news one day, and then the next day they declared it a pandemic and so for us—it's, you know, we started hearing—you know, "Wear face masks," "Don't wear face masks," "Six feet, three feet, three to six feet," and it was it was very confusing, especially for us in our day to day operations overseas because I—it's like, how do you necessarily carry out a mission when you have to also follow these guidelines, and we were pretty isolated at that point where we were so it was kind of [audio cuts out] detrimental—was because we were around the same people that we had been around for going on six months. So yeah it was—it was tough, and then a lot of us wound up getting extended past our time to go home too. So that impacted- impacted our personal lives a lot.

Travis Gunnells: 3:23

Okay. Yeah. So your daily life was definitely interrupted, your personal life back home, stuff like that people worrying about it. How did that like, affect you?

CJ Willingham 3:35

So day to day, it was- it was just hard because like early on it was [audio cuts out] ...are we shut down or not shutting things down new restrictions. Going to the chow hall, not being able to sit in it or having to wear your mask and where you can't, where you mask. Then, as far as back home, it was- it caused more of a concern and more of a stress on us because I—you know... being- being the primary provider for my household... it was tough to not be here. My- my spouse was furloughed from her job. So having to go into unemployment and stuff [audio cuts out] ...and pain. Then obviously there was there was the concern with being able to buy cleaning products and- and toilet paper in where to find that and so it added a little more—It was very unusual stress to have because it's stuff that we never really thought about that we kind of took for granted until it happened.

Travis Gunnells 4:45

And so when you have that then and see you see it now how does it affect you now, especially with your job and your daily life job?

CJ Willingham 4:56

Job it's- it- it's tougher now being a civilian police officer because before, I mean I encountered- I encountered people every day that had active MRSA, HIV positive, to have the common cold or like, even during flu season people that have the flu and you know—sometimes you have to go hands on with those individuals, and it's not unusual to get bodily fluids all over you during a shift so... and before it was never really a—it was a cause for concern and you would go to the hospital and you get seen for it. Like now it's [audio cuts out] ...to have to get close to people if you don't have to. I know our city has a directive that all city employees will wear a mask for the duration of their shift. A lot of officers didn't necessarily take that serious at first, but now it's—we're basically being told you- you need to wear a mask, and we've seen how detrimental it can be. We've had some officers test positive for COVID-19. My district—my police district in particular we have an entire shift that is out on quarantine right now because they all tested positive so now we're having to figure out we're having to have people [audio cuts out] cover that overlap in time. So it's- it causes a lot of operational and logistical concern. And as far as my personal life, I just... it's- it's business as usual. We kind of have a plan in place that if- if I do—because we do—we are usually made aware of we're on our way to a call, if somebody's involved in that call is tested positive for COVID-19 and like, you know, what would happen from there where I would stay and stuff like that, so...

Travis Gunnells 7:02

Yeah that's pretty interesting to hear about going from no- you have no you—have no worries—right and then you get hit with this pandemic and it's a serious effect on the manpower... right. And you know, COVID-19, wasn't the only thing this year that was interesting. This year has been interesting throughout. Many things have happened, like the protests starting out with COVID. What do you remember about the initial protests?

CJ Willingham 7:36

So I was still overseas if you're referring to the George Floyd.

Travis Gunnells 7:41

Oh yeah.

CJ Willingham 7:44

So I was- I was overseas when the Georgia incident happened. I don't necessarily watch the news a whole lot just because it's— I'm not a huge- I'm not a fan, but it was circulating social media, the George Floyd incident. And people typically expect you as a police officer to side with the other police officers, and I I'm not an advocate for Monday morning quarterbacking just because I've- I've been through a critical incident myself, and it's very easy to say what you would have done when you're on the outside looking in [audio cuts out] so with George Floyd was—it was—it was pretty gut wrenching. We're not in any way shape or form, any department in the United States, we are not taught to kneel on anybody's neck to block their airway. One of the things they harp on with us with us during our SCAT, our Subject Control Arrest Technique, is to constantly monitor your arrestees airway and whether they're breathing in there okay. Greensboro police had an in-custody death which couldn't have necessarily been avoided, but since then we've been hyper vigilant on making sure that the people that you arrest you know if they— if they tell you- if you can tell clearly that they're not doing okay, you need to get EMS [Emergency Medical Service] started. There's certain protocols in place, but there's zero protocol

stating that it's okay or acceptable in any way to block somebody's airway. Especially when you have four officers on scene against one person. It seemed like a little much [audio cuts out] people were kind of outraged with it, but I think what added to the protest was you have... you have people in the United States who were forced to basically be cooped up in their house for- for going on for months, so you have people that were used to going out, and- and they were able to distract themselves with their day to day lives and their hobbies and their jobs and now, you know, your quarantine people were stuck in their phones. Ti Tok was a thing that blew up and so then you had this huge movement, and I feel like the anger wallet was justified; it evolved into this domino effect almost of what I like to call recreational anger where people just they're bored, or they don't find any purpose... and so like if they feel like if they can be angry at something, it keeps them entertained, I guess. [audio cuts out] But I- it kind of- it kind of turned into chaos there with some of the rioting and the looting, and that caused concern for me because I'm an advocate for- for protesting... protests whatever you feel as long as it's peaceful because I'm on the riot control squad with the police department, so we get called out frequently for protests at abortion clinics and what have you, and we're all about keeping the peace, but when it turns into to rioting it's- I think it was kind of counterproductive. That's where it got pretty counterproductive because your- your kids have to be raised in the city, and you're essentially going to be raising them in a city full of ruin.

Travis Gunnells 11:27

Okay. What- what protest- so you have the George Floyd protest, right, and then you have the protest prior to that, do those protests... what are your views on those protests? Are they saying the- does it take away from those or does...

CJ Willingham 11:46

Are you talking—which protest?

Travis Gunnells 11:48

So you had the restrictions on staying in your home, stuff like that.

CJ Willingham 11:52

Yeah.

Travis Gunnells 11:54

Is it different? What are- what are your views? What- what type of... does it- the protest in general?

CJ Willingham 12:05

I think it's a lot of... it's hard because in a way you're comparing apples to oranges.

Travis Gunnells 12:11

Right.

CJ Willingham 12:12

But in other ways, you have- and I've heard people's arguments before where, you know, they feel as though like the- the stay at home order and- and the wear, you know, the mandating of the

mass and everything was a violation of- of their constitutional rights and I—I understand where people can get that, and then you've got the George Floyd protest where people are protesting basic human rights, so in a way you're [audio cuts out] there's some different in their own way as far as like the severity of it, I feel

Travis Gunnells 12:44

Right.

CJ Willingham 12:45

All the protests on the restrictions didn't get, to my knowledge, they didn't get violent in the way that the George Floyd protest did. I just feel like a lot of it was if you look at the- some of the demographic of the people who were protesting, a lot of them it was, I think, it's about the- the point in like the origin of what we're trying to get done here is what most protests are a movement and there's generally a- there's an epicenter of okay this is the mission we're trying to accomplish. I'm not necessarily sure what the people protesting the restrictions we're trying to accomplish, but I think both instances, in their own way, it was a lot of people have had a lot of angst because they were cooped up in their house. Nobody knows [audio cuts out] The CDC [Center for Disease Control] and the World Health Organization will tell you something today and then three days later, they'll negate what they said, “No this is actually what we what you need to do,” and it was— it's a lot of frustration. It's a lot of generalized frustration.

Travis Gunnells 13:58

Okay, so from those protests, right, the George Floyd one... what—so my question really is how can police brutality, if it can be, how can it be prevented? How can police brutality be prevented?

CJ Willingham 14:20

So this is [audio cuts out] ...I had friends... I've had family members reach out about this topic. So before it was really hard to truly discuss. I think what it what it comes down to is- is accountability. I don't necessarily- you know, you get the conversations about defunding the police, and they'll say defund the police on one hand and then on the flip side of that coin they'll say we need more training. Well in order to get more training, you need to invest. I think [audio cuts out] because a lot of times with some of these large police organizations, so you've got like the NYPD [New York Police Department, New York] and the Eric Garner case—you've got the Charlotte Mecklenburg police department here in North Carolina. and then you've got like the Minneapolis [Minnesota] with George Floyd, you've got the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department, California]. A lot of these large municipality departments- you're as an officer, you're just another number, and when you do that, it's easy to get lost in the system. So they don't... I don't know personally some of their [audio cuts out] ...that it's- it's probably got to be difficult when you've got a department of- like you got the NYPD probably- we'll- we'll throw out a number like 20,000 police officers in the NYPD—it's hard to ensure that they're getting their in service training and they're getting their legal update and they are getting the proper, you know, refreshment training that they need when you have that many officers, so I think it comes down to accountability not just with the department and [audio cuts out] ...officers as well. It's something that we learned. So generally with North Carolina one of in basic law enforcement training—one of our courses is law enforcement code of ethics and part of the code of ethics, one

of the ethical fallacies that we tend to have in the police community is what we call the blue curtain code of silence. Which essentially is if I see another officer doing something inherently wrong, but because that's my brother or my sister, I'm going to shut my mouth and I'm going to support them because I would expect them to do that with me, and I feel like we need to move away from that while we are a fraternity, because officers- police officers have a bond like, in the military we have a bond, it's pretty similar. I mean, you're- you're [audio cuts out] ...code to call with these people... you're doing CPR [Cardiopulmonary resuscitation] on victims with these people—you I mean—you're- you're experiencing the unthinkable with these people in a 12 hour shift. However, I think people need to need to speak up when wrong is being done in their presence, and I don't think that that happens enough because I feel in the case with George Floyd, it's just it- the bystander effect took place because he kneeled on his neck for a total of nine minutes was how long the clip was before they finally got it [audio cuts out] ...to understand how in that nine minutes, nobody- not another officer had the presence of mind to say, "Hey man, maybe we should like take control of this situation and get him up off the ground." So I think it boils down to accountability not just from the top down but from the bottom up. Systematically, there needs to be that accountability if somebody is doing something and that's where I feel like the Greensboro Police Department does a very good job. We audit our body worn cameras biweekly [audio cuts out] ...footage. Our Internal Affairs Bureau is outstanding; they investigate any type of citizens complaint officers complaint, or otherwise. They are very, very... they're not partial at all, and the city council does a very good job as well of keeping us in check that we keep them in check, so...

Travis Gunnells 19:03

So do you think police—so can police reform work?

CJ Willingham 19:10

It can. It's just it's not going to be an overnight process, and I think that's where the- the generational disconnect happens with this younger generation is they're, you know, you're born- these kids are born now, and they're, you know, [snaps fingers] phones putting their hand, and they're given everything at the speed of light so that's how they expect everything to happen. But with any type of organizational restructure or any type of training restructure, it's going to take time because you're going to have these officers that have been here for 15, 20, 30 years that, you know, are set in their ways. It's- it's going to be difficult to try and reform their type of policing, and I believe that that's why you're seeing a lot of resignations in a lot of departments. I know the Baltimore Police Department [Maryland] this week had about 43 officers resign, so I- I think it can be done. It's just going to be a slow and excruciating process

Travis Gunnells 20:13

And going back to the George Floyd protests, can you describe the effect of the protest towards George Floyd and the social justice movement again? Does it take away from the actual social justice of what happened because you- you reiterated that the chaos of it kind of...

CJ Willingham 20:39

I think that it started out great and it started out- I mean it started out pretty- pretty well. I mean it was to be expected that that there was going to be some sort of civil unrest, and I think that some of the movements that were behind the protests, they started out very well, and then I think

what will you had happen a lot of times what we saw, at least in our protests here in Greensboro, was a lot of your- your singular and specialized groups, your ANTIFA [Anti-Fascist Political Movement] [audio cuts out] ...used the protesting as like subterfuge to essentially reign chaos. And a lot of people- it's easy to point at the face of the movement and be like, "It's your fault; you guys are the ones that are doing it." But I know, at least here in Greensboro, the ones that we arrested, because our Civil Rights Museum was actually- it was- it was destroyed, and I know the individuals that we arrested for that, I think we arrested five or six individuals for that, and they- they were all white and had nothing to do with the Black Lives Matter movement. They were ANTIFA, anti-fascist, and affiliated with sovereign citizens or Moorish nationals as they would like to be called. So I think it's hard. I think that now what those organizations are doing where they are, you know, that they use the presidential election. They're pushing out education about you know, "Hey look at your candidates. Make sure you know who you're voting for." And they're actually trying to reform policy, that's the route that should have been taken in the first place because as much as I'd like to say that protests get the job done, they don't necessarily [audio cuts out] get the job done.

Travis Gunnells 22:42

So who would be able to get the job—you think the reformers and the politicians?

CJ Willingham 22:50

Right. I think that, you know, by reforming policies, by paying attention to the elected officials that you put in office, and actually holding them accountable, because a lot of times you have constituents that will elect somebody into office, but then it's over after—it's like, "Oh, we won okay..." [audio cuts out] ...into office accountable, and when those individuals don't come through, there's no account—there's no accountability there.

Travis Gunnells 23:24

Okay. Have you noticed- or what about the organizations taking a stance for social justice equality, like outside agencies, that could be possibly helping the their local, state level areas for minorities and stuff like that? So you have like colleges, NBA [National Basketball Association], stuff like that?

CJ Willingham 23:51

Are you asking like....

Travis Gunnells 23:52

Yeah, what... so what are your views on those organizations helping? Are they better for...

CJ Willingham 24:03

Absolutely. I think—I've always had the mindset as a leader in the military, and you know if you're—it's better to come to me with a solution along with your problem than just sitting here screaming the problem like we don't already know what's going on, so I think it's great that a lot of these organizations they've identified the problem, they voice their issues with the problem, and now they are working to fix it, and they are finding solutions. And I think they're better they're better for it.

Travis Gunnells 24:39

So the concluding question, you've covered everything I had. What are your hopes for social justice movement- movements moving forward?

CJ Willingham 24:54

To be honest it's- it's gonna be tough with COVID-19 going on, and I think [audio cuts out] ...that was a- that was a tension that, I mean, is unprecedented at this point, the amount of tension that was in the public at that point. We'll see what happens in January when the new [audio cuts out] is inaugurated into office. Hopefully from there, work gets done. I just- we're never going to go back to normal, and I think people need to get over that where it's because you have [audio cuts out] ...COVID's gonna be... and I don't think that that's feasible. I just hope that the new normal is a little more peaceful and there's a little- there's a little more tolerance in the world and a little less, you know, just hate and ignorance.

Travis Gunnells 25:58

All right. This is the conclusion of our oral history interview. Thank you, CJ Willingham. [both laugh] It was a pleasure hearing you this day 27, November 2020. Concluding the interview at 20:09 hours Central Standard Time. Do you have any questions for me or anything you would like to add?

CJ Willingham 26:30

No.

Travis Gunnells 26:31

No? All right. Thank you so much.

CJ Willingham 26:37

Thank you.