

Remembering The Contributions Of Police Chief Reuben Greenberg

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In our final installment to commemorate Black History Month for 2021, Rosen Hagood takes a look at the life and leadership of former police chief Reuben Greenberg, the first black police chief of Charleston who passed away in 2014. We begin with an unlikely story that symbolizes not only Greenberg's character but the heart of the Charleston community.

During the 1980s, the Ku Klux Klan applied for a permit to march in Charleston. Legally, there was no way to deny the group a permit. But Greenberg came up with a suggestion: grant the permit for 2 pm in August, when the heat would be insufferable and the crowds sparse.

Reuben informed Mayor Joe Riley that he would be in charge of leading the group, to keep them safe. "This is what you had; a brilliant, black, Jewish police chief leading a Klan march," Riley later observed. The KKK never returned to march.

The story is a reminder of how Greenberg led the city through some of its more tumultuous times, strengthened the community, and brought down crime rates in the city.

Riley, who selected Greenberg to head the police force in 1982, was a hands-on chief. He would often arrive on crime scenes before patrol officers. He had a presence that made the community feel respected and safe. The results showed that his approach was successful, as the city's crime rate fell under his tenure.

Born in Texas in 1943 to a Jewish father and African American mother, Greenberg was as much an academic as a police chief. He was a graduate of the FBI Academy with master's degrees from the University of California-Berkeley, and taught college courses as well. His teaching career spanned coast to coast, from California State University to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Florida International University.

Greenberg was determined to make the Charleston police force a model for how to forge relationships within the community. He saw the role of law enforcement as not to punish (which is the domain of the courts) but to make arrests and keep the city safe. But he recognized that this requires showing the public how accessible the police can and should be. To that end, he instructed his officers to conduct patrols on the streets, not in cars. His officers walked, rode bicycles, and rode horses. He wanted normal, everyday people to feel that they could trust law enforcement.

He also made reforms to the department by requiring all officers to earn a bachelor's degree, adding a bomb and drug-sniffing K-9 unit, and bringing a crime lab to the department. During

his time as police chief, Charleston’s population increased 64% while crime decreased 11%.

After 23 years in service Greenberg retired in 2005. Charleston gave Greenberg a celebratory send-off and named a city building in his honor. Mayor Riley remembered Greenberg at his 2014 funeral ceremony. “Reuben opened doors of racial progress all over this community,” he said. “He made the city safer, and made it a more just and better place.”

Long before our current era, Reuben Greenberg demonstrated how policing can be done in a fair and productive manner. **Rosen Hagood** salutes the accomplishments of local black leaders like Greenberg, who contributed mightily to the overall betterment of our Charleston.