

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Lack of trust is the problem

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Commenting on racial tension in America, then-President Bill Clinton said: “We have to understand the roots of black pain and white fear.”

That tension rages 20 years later in videos on cellphone cameras. A bystander captured the arrest of 18-year old African-American woman Genele Laird outside East Towne Mall three weeks ago. The amateur video showed one of two white cops kneeling, punching and tasing the physically petite Laird into submission. The rough tactics were deployed as Laird kicked, scratched, screamed and spit at the officers. Police were called after Laird showed a knife inside the mall in a dispute over her missing cellphone.

The ugly incident prompted Madison’s leading black and white progressive leaders to protest, calling out the police for using “excessive force.” District Attorney Ismael Ozanne was so appalled he didn’t charge Laird with a crime for her performance. He instead referred her to a restorative justice program for misdemeanor offenses.

The arrest is being reviewed by the Dane County Sheriff’s Office. But on my radio show last week, Madison Police Chief Mike Koval addressed the use of force during an arrest: “If the suspect has the will and capacity to resist, it only becomes more difficult and protracted. Gaining and maintaining control and getting the suspect ready for transport is almost never a clean process,” he said.

All of this comes after the Madison City Council voted to spend \$400,000 to review the procedures and culture of the police department. A recent council meeting became so intense Ald. Samba Baldeh said he felt uncomfortable with the armed Koval sitting by him. As for Koval’s statement on his blog to the council, “I’ll be watching you,” Koval said he meant he would be watching what council members do on public policy.

On the Southwest Side of Madison, residents are putting up signs that say, “We support Madison Police.” And as of this writing, more than 1,600 signatures had been collected on a petition showing support for the cops. Neighborhood organizer Dave Glomp says the signers are multi-racial. Neighbors appreciate more patrols after 800 residents showed up demanding more police at a public hearing in 2007. The city added 20 more officers after that.

All of this theater comes at a time of almost daily videos of white cops shooting black men in Baton Rouge, the Twin Cities, Chicago and elsewhere, followed by snipers shooting 11 cops in Dallas and killing five. In the Minnesota case, the victim announced to the cop he

had a permit to carry a firearm. While he reached for his driver's license, the cop shot him four times.

It all comes back to black pain and white fear. African-Americans feel the pain of being seen as a threat to whites. It could be a case of being stopped unjustly or, as a black friend described to me, the pain of having an usher ask him to show his ticket at a Milwaukee Bucks game when no such question was asked of his white office mates.

White fear was described by Barack Obama in 2008. He said his white grandmother was afraid of black men walking behind her.

It's time to calm down. Instead of a \$400,000 consultant, buy the Madison cops body cameras so we can always see what they do. As for black suspects, innocent or otherwise, your loved ones don't want you to die. Do what the cops say and keep your hands behind your head or on the steering wheel. It may be humiliating, but the cops have guns, and they can shoot you dead.

*Mitch is a Madison, Wisconsin based commentator, broadcaster and standup comic.
The Mitch Henck Show is broadcast live 8-11a.m. Monday-Friday at www.mitchhenck.com.
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