

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

I've spoken before in this column about musician James Taylor who said, "You actually have to really defend your time in order to have a long thought." As Sheriff of this vibrant and engaged community, I'm a busy guy. Time for the valuable long thought is not always easy to come by, but I try to find it when I can.

I attended the North Carolina Sheriffs Association (NCSA) conference earlier this month, and the drive to Atlantic Beach was one such opportunity. I had miles and miles to be alone in my head and reflect on this year, the community I serve, and the Thanksgiving holiday.

Others have said much about the difficulties of 2020. I certainly agree, but my focus today is gratitude. I used my long thought time to do some blessing counting. I started by looking backward. My parents built a foundation of love, support, and encouragement. They always stressed the importance of being respectful of others. My teachers and coaches shared practical and philosophical lessons I continue to use. I am grateful for these positive influences.

I then thought about my family life and personal blessings; I am especially grateful for my children and my wife Lisa. As you might imagine, a Sheriff is never off duty. Many conversations and meals with my wife are interrupted by calls or texts, and our plans are frequently altered or canceled. Mind you, I am not complaining – I am celebrating Lisa's constant ability to provide flexibility, tolerance, and support. I also want to celebrate my mother's return to health after surgery for a broken hip. This year also brought me one of the happiest blessings ever – our grandson. Watching him grow and thrive is an endless source of delight, and I love seeing our daughter and his father blossom as parents.

The people who serve with me at the Sheriff's Office are stellar. I hope their professionalism, dedication, and commitment to the health and safety of this community are as evident to you as they are to me. One of the hidden blessings of COVID-19 has been the opportunity to see them demonstrate the ability to be flexible in the face of uncertainty and adapt their service to the emerging and changing demands of a pandemic. Additionally, they grappled with shock and outrage caused by the Minneapolis police officers' killing of George Floyd. They stood tall against the notion that all law enforcement officers behave that way or tolerate such behavior in

their coworkers. It is a profound blessing to lead people who are proud to serve and willing to bear scrutiny because they have confidence in themselves and each other. They trust the work we do and the way we do it. They believe public scrutiny will help us continually improve, and allow our community to see both our integrity and professional approach to service.

Finally, I spent time on my drive thinking about one of the biggest blessings of all, which is that the people of this County placed their trust in me to serve as their Sheriff, first in 2014 and again in 2018. I look forward to continuing to serve in that capacity, especially now, during this time where we are being asked to work on real and lasting change within the criminal justice system. This is a unique county, full of people also dedicated to service, change, and growth. As a younger man, I thought communities were primarily different only in their geography or population. But over the years, I have come to realize communities have distinct personalities. I understand so much more than I used to about how profoundly fortunate I am to live and serve here in Orange County. I appreciate what an asset it is to have a world-class university contributing to our quality of life and our vibrancy. Our elected leaders are committed and compassionate. We have an astonishing array of non-profit agencies working steadily to improve the lives and living conditions of others. We have high levels of volunteer engagement. It is a blessing to lead in such a dynamic community.

There is no doubt that 2020 has been a difficult year. However, I am convinced there is value in the process of deliberate reflection on the positive. I encourage all of you to find time over the Thanksgiving holiday for some long-thought blessing counting. The experience certainly put a bounce in my step and some cheer in my heart. I wish the same for you.