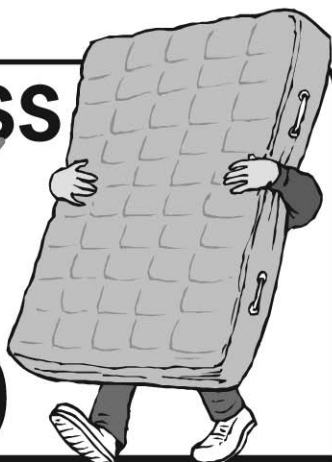


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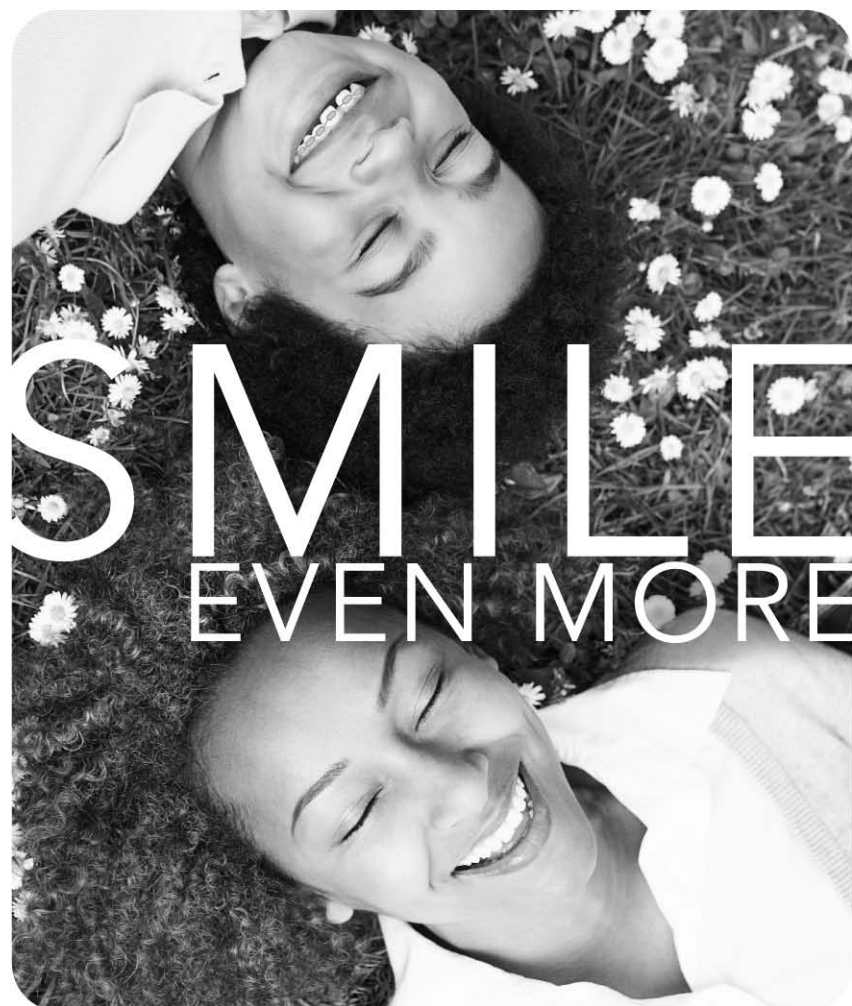
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Editor's Note

Shadow of a Doubt

The weekly media roundtable on WJCT 89.9 FM can be funny, surprising, informative or insufferable, depending on the panel. But it is rarely something that generates its own buzz. Conceived as a forum for local journalists to discuss the week's headlines, the panel is composed of people accustomed to reporting the news, not becoming the news.

But the July 2 program was different. Barely a minute in, what might have otherwise been a routine discussion about the killing of two police officers in Tampa turned red hot. Panelist Dan Evans from The Florida Star responded first, dismissing any discussion of the suspect's outstanding warrants as a "a smokescreen to keep what's really happening from coming out."

"He did shoot two police officers," Evans continued. "Why, we really still don't know. ... Not saying it's right, not saying it's wrong, but we don't know."

WJCT reporter Cristin Wilson tried to corral Evans, calling that line of thinking a "dangerous slope."

"We don't know what happened between him and the

journalist. Not only was there no factual basis for them, but they seemed unforgivably cold. But I am a white female, and in a sense, could not be further from the experience Evans describes. I was recently stopped by police. I'd committed a blatant moving violation, and didn't have my vehicle registration in the car. The officer let me off with a warning and a wave. That is not an experience to which most black men can relate. The mistrust that blacks



The killer seemed ruthless — the officers were each shot through the head — and professional; he vanished, eluding law enforcement for four days until voluntarily turning himself in.

police officers — that is true. Regardless, two men should not be dead."

"Well, we don't know that," Evans blithely countered. "They are dead — that's reality. They are. And what took place for them to be that way ...?" He trailed off.

The morning of the show, the officers were barely cold, and certainly not in their graves, but Evans' line of argument wasn't merely indelicate. It was an entirely new narrative. Nothing had been reported to suggest that the traffic stop that precipitated the killings was questionable, or that the officers behaved incorrectly in any way. To the contrary. The killer seemed ruthless — the officers were each shot through the head — and professional; he vanished, eluding law enforcement for four days until voluntarily turning himself in. Police now believe that between his release from jail on April 2, and his eventual arrest, Dontae Rashawn Morris killed five people.

The crime was particularly wrenching in Tampa, where another officer was killed just last August. One of the officers killed last month left behind four kids. The other's wife was nine months pregnant, and went into labor within hours of his death. So upsetting was the news that Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio burst into tears at a press conference when recounting the incident.

As a WJCT listener that day (though an occasional panelist), I found Evans' comments wildly inappropriate, particularly coming from a

feel for police is so profound that it poisons every interaction, and (as Evans' comments show) makes the larger community skeptical, if not outright distrustful, of everything law enforcement does.

In Oakland, Calif., last week, riots broke out after a jury returned a verdict of involuntary manslaughter in the case of a white officer who shot an unarmed black suspect in the back. The officer claimed he hadn't meant to shoot the victim; he'd pulled out what he thought was a Taser and fired. Several videos of the incident were taken by bystanders, and at least one of them — to my eyes — seems to back him up. The officer appears stunned when his gun goes off. He stares blankly for a moment, then puts his hands to his head. There is no tough-guy posturing, no apparent surge of testosterone, just a cop with a smoking gun who looks like he's going to puke.

But I view the video through the lens of personal experience. The same is true for the Oakland jury, which had no blacks on it, and which deliberated only six hours before deciding the death was accidental. For jurors, the death was plausibly an accident. For the family, it was cold-blooded murder. And as long as the gulf that exists between black men and law enforcement continues to twist hearts and shape impressions, those two sides will never meet. □

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