**RPD chief forms community advisory committee, but is not publicly identifying most of its members**

Richmond Police Chief Gerald Smith has established an External Advisory Committee that he hopes will strengthen relationships and foster greater trust between his department and city residents.

But despite widespread calls for greater police transparency and accountability in Richmond and nationwide, Smith has declined to name all but one of the new committee’s 15 members and balked when asked if a reporter could cover one of the meetings.

He said some members of the committee would not want to be publicly identified because they could face harassment by those who would shame or condemn them for cooperating with the police.

Smith announced the creation of the committee as a structure for the police to learn about neighborhood complaints, concerns and crime trends evolving in the community, and as a format for the department to inform residents about its thinking and law enforcement strategies.

It was unclear exactly how the larger community would be informed about the work of the committee.

The advisory committee is focused on three primary issues: community involvement, officer recruitment and transparency.

In an interview at Richmond Police Department headquarters one week after Smith issued a news release about the committee, he said transparency is a hot topic and his department is examining what kinds of information it can legally release.

He said his officers and other staff “are great subject matter experts and they know what they’re doing,” but the department is considering whether it could do a better job of clearly explaining certain policies and actions to the community.

“Are we letting people know what they really want to know?” he said.

After the Richmond Times-Dispatch requested a list of the committee’s members and contact information for them, police officials released the name and phone number for one member of the committee, but Smith declined to identify the other 14 members, whom he characterized as diverse in terms of age, race and walks of life. A department spokeswoman said no one on the committee is an RPD employee or former employee.

“In this environment, some people do have concerns about being ‘doxed,’ ” said Smith, referring to the practice of maliciously publishing private information about people online. Some anti-police activists, the chief said, would say: “Why are you working with the police?”

For similar reasons, Smith said he would need to see whether committee members are comfortable having a reporter cover meetings. He said that if it were up to him, he would allow media coverage, “because I think it’s great work.”

Charles Willis, executive director of United Communities Against Crime, an organization that holds vigils for those killed in Richmond and Henrico County, said he supports the chief’s establishment of the committee, but believes someone from his group should have been asked to participate.

Willis said transparency “starts with first knowing who’s on the committee.” But he agreed with Smith that the concern about harassment is a valid reason not to publicly name committee members. RPD’s primary responsibility is public safety, he said, and that should extend to members of the advisory committee.

“We have people now who are destroying people’s property just because you have a yard sign out there,” Willis said.

Princess Blanding, an outspoken advocate for police accountability who was not asked to be on the advisory committee, said she “hears” the chief’s concern about committee members facing public harassment, but said, “We need fearless people in these positions.”

In her work as an activist, she said she is often met with ignorant remarks, but “I know what I signed up for.”

“If the people on the committee don’t want the public to know they’re on the committee, then I don’t think they should be on the committee,” she said.

Blanding’s brother, Marcus-David Peters, was unarmed and experiencing a mental health crisis when he was shot and killed by a police officer along Interstate 95 in Richmond in 2018.

The shooting was deemed justified by the city’s former police chief and prosecutor at the time, because Peters threatened to kill the officer as he charged him. Peters’ name was a rallying cry for protesters in Richmond during a summer of unrest.

In announcing the External Advisory Committee, RPD said in a news release on Oct. 14 that the panel is made up of 15 “community leaders from various segments of the Metropolitan Richmond area.” A police spokesperson added that all members “have strong connections and knowledge of the City of Richmond.”

The one resident the police identified and who agreed to be interviewed — Naomi H. Davis — said she does not live in the city, and would only say that she lives in the metro area and has worked in the city for more than 30 years in a community engagement capacity.

Blanding pointed out that her application to join a City Council-approved task force to establish a civilian review board was denied because she is not a city resident. Chief Smith has said he fully supports creating the review board, an independent community panel with the power to investigate and subpoena the police department.

“There’s so many work groups already in place,” Blanding said. “We’re beyond that. We need action.”

In addition to the RPD’s External Advisory Committee, Mayor Levar Stoney in July formed a task force to “reimagine” public safety.

Davis said she was appointed to Smith’s External Advisory Committee after someone from RPD approached her and asked if she was interested. She said it’s good that others on the committee are not being named because, if they were publicly identified, others would be asking committee members questions and giving advice.

“We want this to be an orderly process that’s going to be productive,” she said. “We don’t want people to get caught up in who’s on the committee, rather than what the committee represents.”

Davis said she and other members have met only a few times and are in an information-gathering stage. They want to learn more from the police department about its inner workings before suggesting changes.

“We want the police to be active, but we want them to be active in a positive way,” Davis said. “I think this is a very good use of time. It begins building relationships that we did not have.”

She added that she does not hear about a lot of problems within the RPD compared with other departments in the U.S.

“There are a lot of areas in a lot of departments that need to change,” she said.

Among the issues already discussed at meetings with the committee, Smith said, is the department’s chemical munitions policy, which he has asked the members to review.

The committee will be meeting once a month, and Smith said its work will be ongoing.

“These are big topics,” he said. “I don’t think the work is ever done.”

# Burglary suspect kills Mechanicsville dental hygienist loved by many. 'She had a way with patients'

A lot of people are a little afraid to go to the dentist, and some are very afraid. But Carla Trost was the kind of hygienist who could put them all at ease.

“She had a way with patients that I have never seen with a hygienist,” said dentist Jodie Meredith, who worked with Trost at Hanover Family Dentistry in Mechanicsville.

And that was only one of the things that made Trost special to her patients and colleagues. She also loved to sew and made caps for everyone to wear at work, even a Snoopy one for Meredith, a huge fan of “Peanuts” characters. Always frugal, Trost would hunt for deals on equipment and supplies to make sure the dental practice didn’t pay too much. She even got married during a dental conference in Las Vegas with many of her co-workers there.

“She was really almost the lifeblood of this place when it came to running things smoothly,” Meredith said. “She was kind of like the work mother.”

Trost’s colleagues, patients and many others are remembering her big smile and infectious laugh because they know they will miss her. The 47-year-old was shot and killed on Saturday evening after she and her husband, Steve Walker, interrupted a burglary at their home in Caroline County, law enforcement officials believe.

Her suspected killer also exchanged gunfire with Walker before stealing the couple’s car and escaping. About 36 hours later, on Monday morning, the man fatally shot himself after leading authorities on a high-speed chase along Interstate 64. An alleged accomplice was taken into custody.

The authorities believe that Michael Lee Barlow, 30, of Hanover County, and Leonard Taylor Pippin Jr., 32, of Ashland, arrived on Saturday at Trost and Walker’s home in Sparta to commit a burglary. Investigators believe Barlow had been to the house before to do work for the couple.

In an interview on Tuesday, Caroline County Sheriff A.A. “Tony” Lippa Jr. gave the following account of what happened:

Pippin apparently waited in a vehicle outside while Barlow went into Trost and Walker’s house. Sometime around 5 p.m., Trost and her husband arrived home and saw a man in a car leaving the home. The authorities believe that the man was Pippin and that he took off as soon as the couple got home, leaving Barlow behind.

The man the couple first saw outside was wearing an orange hunting hat, so Walker thought maybe he had stopped to look for a lost hunting dog.

Something didn’t seem right, though, and Trost stayed behind while her husband went into the house, finding the home in mild disarray.

Investigators believe Barlow fled out a back door after he heard Walker enter the house. Walker heard gunshots coming from outside, where the authorities believe Barlow fatally shot Trost.

As Walker was heading out his front door, he encountered Barlow as he was heading back into the house after shooting Trost. The two men exchanged gunfire and Barlow stole the couple’s car and left the scene.

The authorities were summoned at 5:05 p.m. to the home for a report of a burglary and shooting. Sheriff Lippa and several deputies arrived at the scene, where Trost was pronounced dead.

The investigation pointed to Barlow as a suspect and ultimately led authorities to a home in Goochland County on Monday. At about 5:30 that morning, the two suspects drove away from the home and led the authorities on a high-speed chase along westbound Interstate 64 before getting off at Exit 124 and crashing in Albemarle County.

Barlow, who was driving, fatally shot himself as the officers closed in. Pippin was taken into custody.

“This case was solved so quickly for a number of reasons,” Lippa said in a statement. “We put the information we had out quickly on social media and almost immediately began receiving tips. The citizens who provided tips are to be commended.”

He also credited several other law enforcement agencies with assistance. “This entire event has been tragic,” he said. “This was a senseless homicide. Our thoughts and prayers are with the family of Carla.”

Barlow had been charged with capital murder, attempted capital murder, armed robbery, breaking and entering, grand larceny, possession of a gun by a convicted felon, and a related firearm charge.

Pippin faces charges of first-degree murder, conspiracy to commit burglary, conspiracy to commit grand larceny, and grand larceny. On Tuesday, he was moved from the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail to the Pamunkey Regional Jail in Hanover, where he was being held without bond. He had a court hearing scheduled for Wednesday morning in Caroline General District Court.

With one suspect dead and the other in custody, Trost’s friends and loved ones are left to mourn a great loss and wonder how anyone could want to kill such a kind person.

Pam Jordan, who used to work with Trost at the dental office, noted that the authorities believe Barlow had been to Trost’s home before to do work there.

“How could anybody who had ever met her for five minutes have done that to her?” Jordan said. “I’m sure she treated him nice and kind.”

Trost’s patients adored her and she was a selfless friend and employee, Jordan said. She knew so much about animals that it was hard to stump her. One time Jordan’s dog ate a corn cob and Trost told her what to do if that happens and how to prevent it.

“She could give you advice on almost anything,” Jordan said.

Jordan’s husband, Morris Jordan Jr., had started the dental office around 1980 and sold it to Meredith last year. Trost had worked at the practice for about 18 years.

“They’re really going to miss the sound of her laugh around there,” Morris Jordan said. “She had a good easy laugh that put people at ease.”

Kristie Hertsch, a patient who started seeing Trost about 14 years ago, doesn’t normally enjoy going to the dentist, but said that Trost was so gentle that the trips were bearable.

There were pictures on the ceiling, usually an inspirational quote, that Hertsch could read while she was lying back in the dentist’s chair with instruments in her mouth. Trost would tell Hertsch about all the funny things her cats would do.

“She would carry a conversation even if I couldn’t talk because she had tools down my throat,” Hertsch said. “She just made it a little more comfortable. I didn’t feel so scared.”

# Beloved 'Cat Lady' was hit by an alleged DUI driver. Richmond residents are rallying to help.

Margaret Doran is well-known by many residents of Richmond’s Fan neighborhood and Museum District, even if not everyone knows her well.

Known as “The Cat Lady” and “Saint Margaret,” she could be seen trudging with her rolling walker back and forth from near the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to the VCU area, day and night, to feed the innumerable feral cats she called her own. Many residents were inspired by her devotion and energy.

Doran, who is believed to be 77 years old, told one friend she has been caring for feral cats in Richmond for decades.

Residents say she would walk the streets from late morning until late at night to feed colonies of cats at various locations, most of which are unknown to her acquaintances. Some of them worried about her safety because they’d see her limp across dark streets without reflective clothing. Doran, who lives in a rented garage storage unit in an alley off Strawberry Street, told her friends that she’d be fine.

On Dec. 8, shortly before 10 p.m., she was struck by a car in the 500 block of North Robinson Street, near Park and Kensington avenues, and severely injured. Police have charged the driver, 27-year-old Sarah Warner of the Fan District, with DUI.

“She was probably on her way back from feeding her cats,” said Doran’s friend Sally Mullikin, “because that’s basically all she did.”

For those accustomed to seeing Doran out walking every day, a fixture in their lives was suddenly gone. Many realized how much they didn’t know about her. She lived in secret and accepted help from food pantries and a GoFundMe for cat food, but refused offers to help with reflective gear to keep her safe.

“She, in many ways, treated her cats better than she treated herself,” said her pastor, the Rev. Kenny Callaghan. “In essence, Margaret’s cats were her family. I have witnessed her having complete conversations with these cats. She loved them, and they loved her.”

Since the accident, residents have taken to social media to express grief and to find out what happened to Doran, posting many messages on the Nextdoor app. When Callaghan heard last week that Doran had been hit by a car, he called every hospital but couldn’t find her because she had not been identified and was being treated under a “trauma name.”

He found out the trauma name from a friend at the Richmond Police Department and, because she isn’t known to have any family, he went to the hospital and identified her for the police after telling them he was her pastor and showing his clergy credentials. He also tracked down where she was living, leading to the rescue of two of her cats.

Callaghan, senior pastor of Metropolitan Community Church of Richmond, which is about a block from where Doran was struck, has been keeping people updated on her condition.

In an interview, he said Doran had suffered a head injury; fractures to her pelvis, legs and hip; and damage to her neck, spine and abdomen. She has undergone multiple surgeries and will have extensive rehabilitation, Callaghan said, but every surgery has been successful and she is expected to live.

“At first, they told me they didn’t know if she would survive,” said Callaghan, adding that he has not spoken with Doran, who is heavily sedated.

In 24 years as a pastor, Callaghan said he has never seen such an outpouring for someone who has been injured. “Yesterday I got 42 emails,” he said Wednesday.

At one point, he made a request on Nextdoor that people stop calling the hospital to check on her and to ask him for updates instead. So many people were calling, he said, that it was distracting the hospital staff caring for Doran.

As of Thursday, two of Doran’s admirers had sent her gifts to Callaghan’s church through Amazon — a stuffed animal cat and a Purr Pillow Kitty cat toy.

On the night before the accident, Callaghan and his partner were walking their dogs and saw Doran crossing Robinson Street at Park Avenue and stop in the middle of the street to go through her bag. It was about 10:30 p.m. and she was wearing dark clothes and was hunched over her walker. Callaghan said he offered to get her reflectors, which he has begged her to get many times.

He said she replied that she walks at night all the time, that she’s safe and not to worry about her. “She just laughed it off,” he said.

Although much beloved, Doran could be cantankerous at times, several friends said. “She lives life on her own terms and she’s willing to argue and go against the status quo, but underneath she is a very caring, loving, kind and generous individual,” Callaghan said. “She wouldn’t hurt a flea, but she might piss you off.”

Callaghan has known Doran for about four years and said she frequently visits his church’s food pantry and other food pantries in the community. After the accident, some members of the homeless community helped Callaghan find the garage unit in which she was living, unbeknownst to the landlord and without heat, electricity or plumbing.

Two of her cats had been inside the garage unit from the time of the accident until three days later and had no water left. Richmond Animal Care and Control safely trapped the female cats, a Siamese and a brown tabby, and has been keeping them since last Friday. RACC has named them Sully and Clutterbug.

“The environment in which they were living wasn’t very great,” said Christie Chipps Peters, director of RACC, though she noted that both cats had been spayed and were not feral.

“They’re touchable,” she said. If Doran were able, she could reclaim her pets but would have to pay a fee and figure out where they would go, Chipps Peters said. “They can’t go back to where they were.”

If no one claims the cats by Tuesday, they will be available for adoption, she said.

“She was really big on not just feeding the feral colonies, but making sure they were taken care of by spaying and neutering,” said Mullikin, the friend who met Doran about 10 years ago after moving to the Museum District. “That’s not a crazy cat lady — that’s a very responsible person.”

“She knew all the cats by name and where they were coming from,” she added. “They would all come up to her and say thank you and then go back to their hiding holes.”

Since the accident, several women have started feeding one of Doran’s feral colonies in the vicinity of the VMFA. Unfortunately, the volunteers don’t know where the other colonies are, and unfortunately the cats rarely emerge from their hiding places as they would if Doran were there to feed them.

“I’ve only seen one cat,” said Ona King, one of the volunteers who leaves food out for the feral felines. “I think they just hide in the shrubs and stuff until we leave.”

“People are really coming together for her,” said King, adding that residents had set up a GoFundMe page in the past to raise money for cat food for Doran. “I couldn’t believe how far she walks every day and how late she was out at night. She’s very dedicated.”

Mullikin said Doran has become a local legend on par with Donnie “Dirtwoman” Corker, a widely known and colorful character who died in 2017; and Black Dog, a scruffy black canine who roamed Richmond’s West End for more than 10 years and had a big following until his death in 2009.

“Margaret has the same type of mystical urban legend type thing as Black Dog did because everybody kind of knew her as the Cat Lady,” Mullikin said. “She was like the magical Cat Lady who was always there.”