

It's all about
the Island



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Where Are They Now?

Island upbringing inspires innovative policing strategy

By Emily Small

Very few people live on a geographical island, but Palmyra Public Safety director and Island alum James Small says that everyone is on an island in some way. He defines an island as being an isolated area or group and says that definition applies to the workplace.

Problems in Palmyra

Small's island view earned the Palmyra Public Safety Department a Wisconsin Policy Forum Award in 2020 for an approach to employee retention and crime reduction that he spearheaded. PPSD was plagued by community criticism and high turnover when Small was hired as chief in 2015.

Small says PPSD was typical of

most rural police departments, with an abrasive, punitive "in-your-face" style of policing meted out top-down in the department. Based on the credo "you'll do what we tell you," Small says that attitude followed officers into the street where "when you called the police, they came and were disrespectful and didn't help."

Small focused on where he felt the problem actually lay, in a toxic workplace environment. Because turnover was so high, he was able to target and hire people and begin building a healthier culture. Disrespect and bullying were not tolerated and civility training was mandated. In a four-year span, the Outcome Based Policing

Strategy implemented by Small led to zero citizen complaints, doubled employee retention and reduced property crime by 80%.

Something special

Small had an epiphany in 2018 when he enrolled in a Department of Justice program through the UW system to become a certified public manager. He had to submit an applied project for the course.

As he was brainstorming what to write about, he said "all the things I knew intuitively to build into a workplace, I knew it from growing up on the Island." He submitted a 30-page paper



PHOTO GLORIA SMALL

Palmyra Public Safety director and Island alum James Small.

that "reverse engineered" the way he rebuilt the department in Palmyra and I.S.L.A.N.D. was born.

The acronym stands for Inclusion, Safety, Laughs, Authentic Accountability, Nourishment and Direction and gives a framework for the strategy to be taught and implemented in any workplace. It is based on the social network he experienced growing up on Washington Island: "If you get in an argument in a meeting, you know you're going to see that person again in an aisle at Mann's. There are deeply embedded social norms on the Island that allow for certain things, but you can't be a jerk, or it's going to affect your regular interactions."

"There's a reason people keep coming to the Island, something special." Inclusion, Small says, is the basis of that something special. "Everyone on the Island is part of the group, everyone's invited. How many times has there been a sign at the store advertising an open reception?" The price of inclusion is civility; that is a concept that resonates universally, according to Small.

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Winter sunrise



PHOTO BY JOEL GUNNLAUGSSON

A Washington Island ferry makes its way to the Island with cars and trucks, on a calm, cold winter morning, complete with a spectacular sunrise.

Former editor Marik dies

Mary Marik, stalwart contributor, proofreader, and former editor of the Washington Island Observer died Dec. 27, 2021, in her home in Chicago.

Marik's continued help and influence was instrumental in developing the Observer into the Wisconsin

Newspaper Association and state-recognized official paper it is today.

The Observer is planning on further tributes. If you have any memory you would like to share, please send to editor@washingtonislandobserver.com

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Island upbringing

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Everyone wants to be included. Small looks to hire people that invite others into things. He trains his employees to look for those who might be isolated and connect. Workplace isolation leads to alienation, and it is why he says people are “leaving the workplace in droves.”

The rest of I.S.L.A.N.D. principles follow suit to create a place where employees want to come to work, where they are a part of something greater than themselves and invested in everyone’s success. That kind of role modeling naturally leads to better policing overall, says Small.

Indefinite data on a definite problem

Small’s I.S.L.A.N.D. is part of a larger movement to reform policing including #BlackLivesMatter, which coalesced in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s killer and has made headlines ever since, protesting police brutality and white supremacy. Summer of 2020 saw American cities erupt in protest after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes during an arrest. Thousands of American citizens began demanding police reform to stop what many saw as unnecessary and racially-motivated deaths at the hands of police.

The exact number of people killed by the police is unknown. There are 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States, many of them with less than 25 employees. Training in statistical analysis and data collection is not included in most police departments. Agencies use their own codes and definitions to delineate incidents, making the information difficult to collate. Researchers and activists have long decried the dearth in accurate reporting, leading to a Bureau of Justice attempt at a comprehensive report in 2016. According to that report, 1200 people were killed by police that year.

Independent organization Mapping Police Violence Database, which uses several sources to collect findings and is widely used by journalists as a comprehensive source of information on police killings, counts 1104 in the same time span. According to MPVD’s 2020 findings, 1126 people were killed by police. Of those deaths, 96% were shootings and most killings began with police responding to non-violent offenses, mental health calls, or cases where no crime was reported.

Despite statistical disparities, Small agrees with the idea that police reform is necessary. “This is not a new issue,” says Small, “We had the same issues in the 80s. But our

country is in a state of transition and policing is the public face of government. The protests, what are they driven by? Race issues, a population underserved by the government in general, not being responsive to people’s concerns, so it reaches this boiling point...if you live in a place where policing is poor, you can’t pick a different one. If you have a bad experience at Walmart, you can go to Target. With police there are no other options, and no outlet. The people in charge aren’t listening or addressing things.”

Warriors and facilitators

According to Small, the demands placed on police officers have changed significantly in recent decades, but officers continue to adopt the outdated role of a warrior. He says, “Now you need to enter every situation as a facilitator who solves problems. Warrior is a card you can play, but it usually escalates problems. You need to be a facilitator every time.”

The role of facilitator requires “kind, compassionate problem solvers,” says Small and those types of people cannot thrive in the abrasive environment of most police departments. Reform starts internally. It is an idea echoed by other voices in the field of police reform.

Angela Workman-Stark, PhD, associate professor and dean at Canada’s Athabasca University, is an expert on organizational justice, workplace inclusion, inclusive leadership, organizational culture and change and identity work. In a Dec. 9 article she wrote in *The Conversation*, she talks about how important “policies and practices that promote a safe and healthy working environment” are to positive change. She told the Observer, “Much of my work stems from the idea that a more inclusive form of policing begins from the inside out, which involves substantive changes to recruitment, training, leadership, HR policies and practices, and culture.” She also advocates “for closer relationships with the police working directly with communities to move away from an ‘us versus them’ mentality.”

More Island lessons

Not only did an Island upbringing influence Small’s insight into creating a healthy police force, but his schooling influenced his ability to follow through. “The easiest thing is to do nothing,” he says, and the expectations set by his teachers at the Washington Island public school did not allow for doing nothing. “We were expected to be productive. The teachers genuinely wanted us to succeed. Even now, there is that engagement. When I come back to the Island, people want to know what I’m doing.”

His Island education left him “very prepared for college...a good academic foundation was laid.” In particular he recounts English teacher Leila



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY GLORIA SMALL

James Small is flanked by his parents Gloria and Lou during Washington Island School’s graduation ceremonies in 1994.

Nehlsen bringing in community members to speak to students about their various areas of expertise. “A really prominent author, Clay Blair, who lived on the Island came and helped us with writing and editing...I still think about him, giving me feedback...it has served me incredibly well, (learning) how to write and explain your ideas.”

Small, class of 1994 became a first responder while still in high school. He also joined the Island fire department in 1994, attended Carroll College and the police academy, and served as an officer on the Island in 1998. After working for the sheriff’s department in Waushara County, he went on to PPSD, received his master’s degree in justice administration from Carroll in 2008 and was picked for Governor Tony Evers’ Wisconsin Law Enforcement Standards Board, where he advises on legislation.

I.S.L.A.N.D. future

Small’s success in Palmyra has earned him some attention in his field and led to him taking the project

to a wider audience. An article about I.S.L.A.N.D. was featured in the July 2020 issue of *Police Chief* magazine and was the subject of a *Policing Matters* podcast. He has taught it in several venues including the Wisconsin Department of Justice conference two years in a row.

Despite bookings canceled by COVID-19, he is galvanized to “get it out there and build momentum.” Small is submitting a TED Talk—a series of presentations made in front of a live audience by experts in their fields, also available online—about the project and working with researchers at the University of Texas to co-author a paper for publication.

Small says he is taking any opportunity to teach and talk about it, and those opportunities hinge on making connections. He trusts his I.S.L.A.N.D. concept can make effective and positive changes in policing and is focused on a solution amidst often polarizing and stagnating debate about police reform. “I just have to keep the ball rolling.”

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