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# 10 years on the beat

IS POLICE CHIEF RALPH EVANGELOUS STILL THE RIGHT PERSON FOR THE JOB?

By Adam Wagner

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Starting with the interview 10 years ago, some city officials knew Wilmington Police Chief Ralph Evangelous was the right man for the job.

Spence Broadhurst, then-mayor who now lives in Greensboro, said he was immediately struck by Evangelous' honesty, transparency and candor.

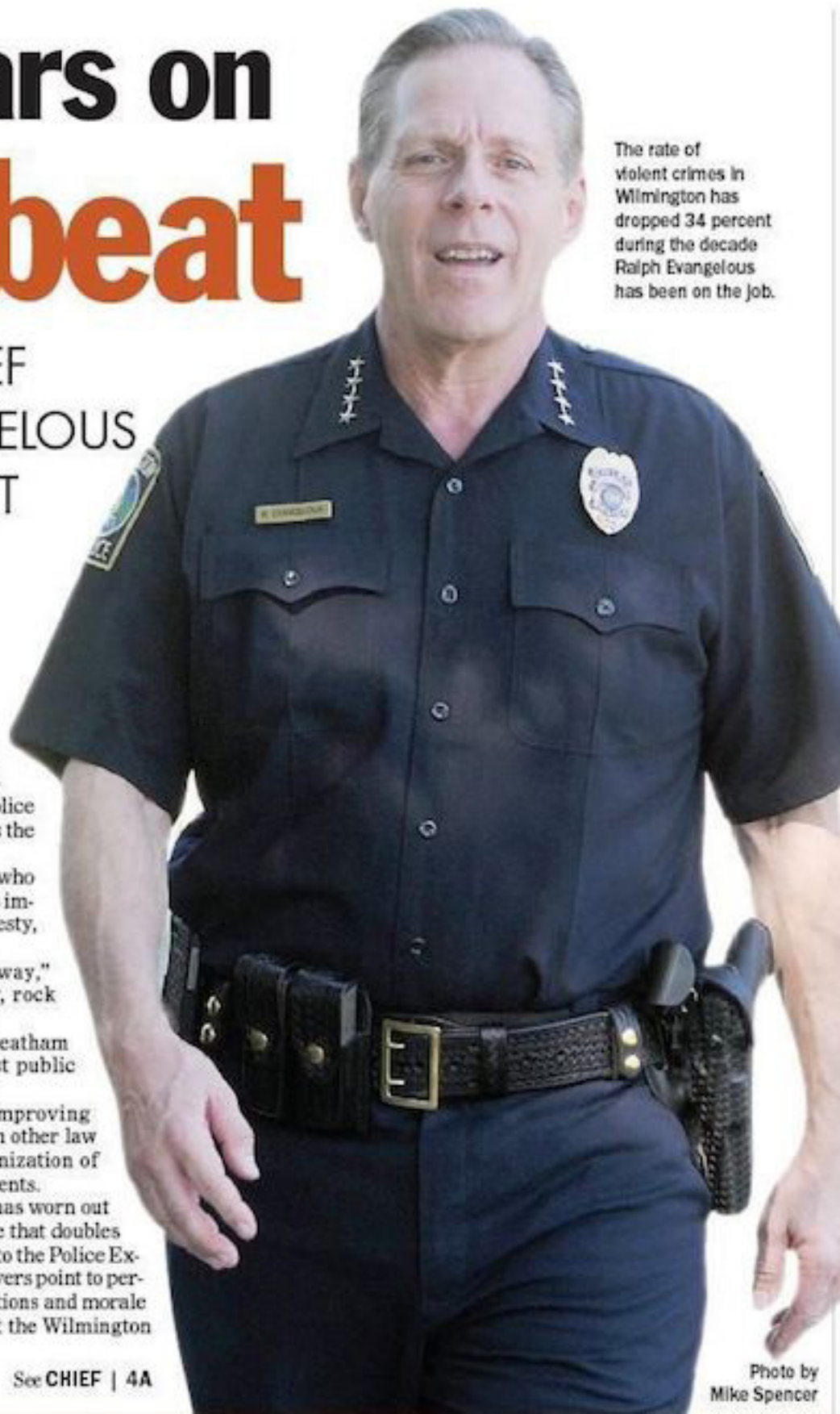
"He kind of took our breath away," Broadhurst said. "He was clearly, rock solid, the person we wanted."

Today, City Manager Sterling Cheatham counts Evangelous among the best public safety employees he's worked with.

Evangelous himself points to improving crime rates, better cooperation with other law enforcement agencies, and modernization of equipment and policies as achievements.

But some critics say Evangelous has worn out his welcome during a 10-year tenure that doubles that of the average chief, according to the Police Executive Research Forum. The naysayers point to perceived fractures in community relations and morale problems within the rank-and-file at the Wilmington

The rate of violent crimes in Wilmington has dropped 34 percent during the decade Ralph Evangelous has been on the job.



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Mike Spencer

# CHIEF

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Police Department.

"I think we need to have a police chief who's much more proactive," said Tom Harris, the owner of Front Street Brewery who has at times clashed with Evangelous and Cheatham about public safety issues. Harris added that he supports all WPD officers below the deputy chief level.

In the face of such criticism, Evangelous stands by his actions.

"You may not like me, you may not like the decisions I make, but I'm gonna do what I feel is right, and I'm gonna stand by my people when they're right," said Evangelous, whose first day was Aug. 16, 2004.

## Modernization

Evangelous became chief shortly after the Police Executive Research Forum issued a report detailing problems within the police department. Some recommendations focused on the department's aging headquarters at 115 Red Cross St.

In 2006, two years into Evangelous' tenure, the police department moved into a new home – a \$24 million building at 615 Bess St. where the air conditioning works and the toilets flush.

A new building isn't the only way WPD has come into the 21st century.

Police also use technology to predict where crime will happen, allowing them to send officers to likely hotspots, Evangelous said.

"We put together various policing strategies and techniques over the years, and we improved on the ones that worked," he said. "When others weren't effective, we would stop and

change and go a different direction."

Such strategies have resulted in a 34 percent drop in the city's violent crime rate, from 953.2 crimes per 100,000 people in 2004 to 624.98 per 100,000 in 2013.

Meanwhile, a point of pride and a sign of modernization for Cheatham is that WPD was accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies for the first time in 2011.

"That's a testament on a national level of whether we're a well-run operation, and that accreditation signals that," Cheatham said.

## Morale

While the city manager thinks WPD is well-run, some employees clearly think otherwise, according to an unofficial employee survey from late 2013.

"Negative morale starts from the top down here at WPD, it is plainly obvious the majority of command staff are disgruntled," said one comment.

Several other complaints were directed at WPD higher-ups, including a perceived lack of communication and leadership. Others focused on pay, the promotional process and a staffing shortage that has since been corrected.

Evangelous contends he is in touch with his employees, noting that he has hourlong individual meetings with three employees per week to discuss their personal and professional lives.

The department also does internal employee surveys, with suggestions occasionally coming to fruition, such as the upcoming shift in the color scheme on WPD cars from white to black and white.

"You know, people can make all the

allegations they want and people can listen to a few people that may be malcontents, but that doesn't speak to the whole organization," Evangelous said.

Cheatham said the department's buy-in has been improved with efforts such as a policy beginning in the 2005-06 budget year that allowed officers with at least two years of experience to take their vehicles home.

"I think that's something that's worked well for the city citizens and the employees over time, and it's an example of changing how equipment is used can have an effect on morale," Cheatham said.

Pay has also been an ongoing issue for WPD. Last November, Jeanne Sexton, the city's human resources director, told the city council the department was paying 8.4 percent below market rate. City employees, including officers, received a 2 percent raise in the 2013-14 budget and a minimum 1.5 percent raise in the 2014-15 budget.

## Relationship with other agencies

WPD and the New Hanover County Sheriff's Office are working together more smoothly than at any point in their recent history, the agencies' leaders said.

"We've had to put our personal opinions, and maybe some of our pride issues, aside," said Ed McMahon, who has been sheriff since 2009. "We've said, 'It's not about us, it's not about the agency, it's about how do we make it work to keep the citizens well protected.' In the 23 years I've been here, I've never seen our relationship with the city police better than it is right now."

The police department and sheriff's office work together on the public housing unit, the SABLE helicopter and on the Downtown Task Force, in which



deputies and officers saturate the area at high-profile times.

In the final months of 2013, the sheriff's office also joined WPD in maximum uniform deployment, an effort in which every officer spent time in uniform on the street.

Cheatham has watched the relationship between the two agencies and their leaders evolve.

"They have a very good, open, hard-working relationship, and I think it starts with their expectations," Cheatham said. "Neither guy expects you to do anything they won't do, and with that attitude you'd be amazed at the things you can agree on and the progress you can make."

Some of that progress is evident in the crime numbers, according to Evangelous.

"It's healthy, and I have to say it's been really effective because look at the results," he said.

## Community relations

Several high-profile incidents at the end of 2013 – including three shootings involving WPD officers and an incident where a K-9 Unit dog bit a man who was seemingly surrendering – created a major challenge for Evangelous.

"We are concerned that officers are expanding their role and deciding for whatever reason – race, class, whatever reason – that they can be judge, jury and executioner," said N.C. NAACP President Rev. William Barber II during a news conference last November.

Residents voiced similar concerns last week at a public hearing regarding the department's accreditation.

"The excessive force is a big concern because people need to feel safe, and

they need to feel protected," said Sonya Patrick, New Hanover County chairwoman of the N.C. Black Leadership Caucus. "Frankly, I don't feel protected, and a lot of people in the community are referring to the law enforcement as a new gang."

Patrick added that her concerns have cropped up only in the past year.

Evangelous and other officials feel the department properly handled the 2013 incidents while continuing to build trust in the agency.

After every incident involving one of his officers, Evangelous said, he has a frank conversation with community leaders.

"I'm open and honest with them, and they're open and honest with me," Evangelous said. "The one thing they can say about me is I tell them how it is – I don't lie to them. The one thing you can never question is my integrity."

That honesty works with other efforts such as the department's work with community watch groups, its citizens' police academy and the Boots on the Ground program, started with local ministers in 2012, to improve the department's image.

"We tend to only hear the squeaky wheel but we forget that there are tens of thousands of people who are supportive of us every single day and the great work that our people do every single day," Evangelous said.

Not everyone thinks that's enough.

Dr. Michael Vasu, a professor emeritus from N.C. State University, said a city of Wilmington's size needs a committee on the city council that can specialize in public safety matters.

"There's just no doubt about it," he said, adding the formation of such a committee would let members special-

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"There's just no doubt about it," he said, adding the formation of such a committee would let members specialize in public safety issues.

Even without such a committee, the department has made some headway under Evangelous' watch, officials said.

"It's my view based on the interaction I've seen between the police chief and organizations like the NAACP that they have probably as open of a relationship now as they've had since I've been here, and that's a good thing," Cheatham said.

## What's next

Even after 10 years, Evangelous hasn't taken the department as far as he would like. Despite the improvement in the city's crime numbers, the chief sees room for improvement.

"We still have too much crime here. We're in a much better position than we were, but we're not where we need to be," Evangelous said. "If we truly want to be a world-class city, we've got to get crime numbers down lower."

Cheatham said he'd like to see police use more nontraditional law enforcement techniques to address the conditions that cause crime.

The chief would also like to see a regional law enforcement training facility with a driving track and a pistol range. It was close to moving forward at one point, but then, Evangelous said, there was a problem with the land.

"That's a struggle for us right now, but we're still working at it and my vision is that will happen," Evangelous said. "We've got multiple agencies involved in making that vision come true."

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