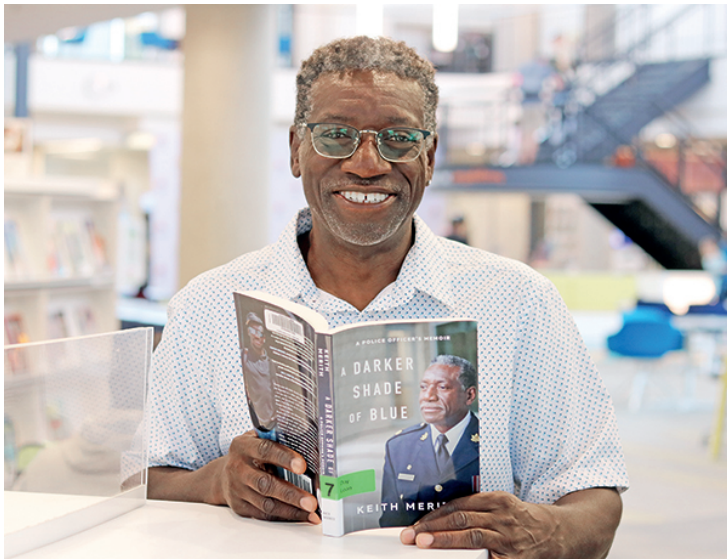


A Darker Shade of Blue: YRP's Merith charts career, challenges in memoir



As a black teen who had challenges with local police growing up, Keith Merith could have been forgiven for not wanting anything to do with the organization. Instead, these experiences galvanized him to be a force for change from within.

The retired York Regional Police Inspector, who hung up his badge in 2017, had many goals to accomplish with his career in the blue behind him, but as COVID hit and he had a bit more time than anticipated on his hands, he "just got out of bed one morning and started to write."

"When I started to write about my early days in policing, I remember the first day on the job and some of the people I met, some of the tasks I was given, but as I continued to write, I started to regress," Merith recalls of the creative journey that resulted in his 2024 book, *A Darker Shade of Blue: A Police Officer's Memoir*.

"I started to go back as a young boy, to my early days growing up in England and some of the nonsense that happened there. I took that and started to go forward again. As the book started to take shape, I had a number of social issues I wanted to address; I had a number of incidents within the Police Service I wanted to talk about internally and externally. There was a nagging in me that had to do primarily with a number of incidences where young black men and women were being killed by police. That really started to bother me. It stayed with me. I kept dissecting what happened in these situations and couldn't quite understand why it was happening because I had similar experiences out on the road with my 31 years of policing and never got to a point where I ever needed to kill someone. When I looked at some of the incidents, I felt as a police officer, with the training I have, it could have been handled differently, better, and the outcomes could have been much better."

The book, which Merith will present at a special author talk at Aurora Town Square's performance hall this Thursday evening, hosted by the Aurora Public Library, touches upon, in the author's words, "the harshness of racism, my experience with it."

"It speaks to the police organization, how it functions. It speaks to social issues and it speaks to the good nature of the work that we do as police officers and how we should be appreciated for the type of work that we do."

Despite negative experience with the police services in his early life, he was galvanized to pursue a career in the services as well, fuelled by the feeling of the police "not serving people like me."

"I thought 'okay, I need to be the change, I need to get inside the organization and work towards change and provide the service I

feel police should be providing," he says. "That was the inspiration for me to actually stop the talking, get involved and put actions to words.

"The first barrier for me was being accepted. When I joined, there was one other black police officer on the service. One. We were foreign entities. We were something new and the police service at the time, and I am not just speaking to my police service, but generally across Canada, was not diversified. If you have people who are running the organization that have no experience dealing with diverse members, some of the issues that arise, the behaviours of the other officers towards your people of colour, then you've got a mountain to climb because there is no redress and there's no recourse. I had to get into that organization and prove myself every single day that I was worthy of being there, that I could do the job and I was not an equal rights employee who was hired because of my skin colour. I had to prove that every day. It was difficult. It was hard."

Merith had a number of instances where he would submit reports, only to find his hard work had "just vanished" from the cue. It gave the impression he was negligent and not doing his job, he says. Instead, folks within the service "were taking my reports, ripping them up, throwing them in the garbage and I would bear the consequences. That was no accident; it was design."

He recalls sitting next to colleagues who would pepper their conversations with racial and cultural pejoratives, including the N-word, and his feeling was they were doing so simply because there were no consequences.

"Put yourself in my position as a young rookie, a person of colour, walking into a detective office full of primarily whites and they are speaking that way. In my head, I am saying: You're saying the word and I am sitting beside you - how do I address that with you because I don't like it? The bottom line was back in the day you couldn't. Not only were you ostracized, but you were targeted."

Through time, Merith found his voice within the organization.

The tide started to turn with his promotion to Sergeant.

"16 years later, after enduring all of this shit and the nonsense, I get promoted to Sergeant - now some of the Constables that I worked with are now reporting to me, or I am a rank above them - and they couldn't give me their shit anymore."

From there, he was promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant, leading those he said "conducted themselves in less than stellar ways." A promotion to Inspector followed.

"That's how the ball rolled to where I had significant influence in how the culture of the organization needed to change and had to change," he says.

Also leading change from within was then-York Regional Police Chief Armand La Barge who Merith says also believed that the organization needed a cultural shift. La Barge promoted many officers of colour which made a world of difference in fostering a police service that reflected the communities they served.

For Merith, writing *A Darker Shade of Blue* was a difficult task - not only from a personal perspective, but in sharing his truth with people who might be less than receptive. Since its publication, however, he says feedback has been "very surprising."

"I received a lot of emails, a lot of texts, a number of phone calls - folks reaching out to me who I never would expected to have reached out to me. A number of officers I either worked with or who know of me, reached out and a number of them poured their heart out to me. These are hardcore, tough cops. A number of them expressed hope that they "did not offend me with the conversations they had with me, or the conversations or the tasks they were doing, while a number of them apologized for their behaviour.

"A number of them talked about their early days where their parents or people around them were bigots or racists and the influence that they had on them and they have seen the light" those are the types of correspondences I was getting and am still getting them,

which is surprising to me because some of them are tough old cops and I never would expect them to do that, but they have.

?Different parts of the book have affected different people in different ways. I'd hoped that would be the case with the book. I wrote it with that in mind to give them a little taste of not only the bad things that happened but a lot of the good things police officers do, why we do what we do, and how we do it.

?I think we need to reach people in their heart. When you get them in the heart, you'll also get the head. I want them to understand that what I am telling them, for the most part, is a personal experience, a first-person. I am talking about me and my experiences. Real experiences that have happened to me. I want them to walk with me and ask the question, why did it happen? Why did these folks behave the way they did? I also want to put it out there that it doesn't have to be this way; we can make changes. They can be incremental and really small, but within your sphere of influence you can make changes.?

For much more with Inspector Merith, come out to A Fireside Chat with Author Keith Merith on Thursday, October 24, at 7 p.m. at the Aurora Town Square Performance Hall. To register, visit bit.ly/3We4pCK or email Nelia at npacheco@aurorapl.ca.

By Brock Weir