Kelly Brownell:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today, I'm delighted to welcome New Orleans Mayor, Mitch Landrieu, back to the program. Welcome, Mayor Landrieu.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

Thank you for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

You come from a political family. Your dad was two-term mayor of New Orleans. He then served as Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development and your sister has held elected office. You've made a name for yourself as tackling many of the very difficult issues that some people see as unfixable. You led a campaign to remove Confederate monuments from city property and publicly apologized for the city's role in the slave trade. You grew up in a majority black neighborhood in New Orleans. You were one of nine children. What do you remember about the neighborhood of your childhood?

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

Oh my God, my neighborhood was great. When I'm running for office, I have a slogan that says, "If it doesn't play on Prieur Street, it doesn't play," which is I grew up on a street called Prieur Street and General Pershing in a neighborhood of New Orleans that's affectionately known as Broadmoor. It was the first mixed neighborhood in the city. I was, as you said, one of nine children. My mom and dad moved into the house that they live in today in 1960 about two weeks before I was born, incidentally right in the middle of my father's first legislative session where he was one of two legislators to oppose the governor's segregation package.

So, I was born into a deep south state in a deep south city where racial matters were always on the forefront of people's minds. My father, who tells this story often, got into the elevator after he took that vote with Leander Perez, who was an infamous sheriff from one of the southern parishes and a Congressman who was a racist. They said that his days were numbered and that he would never survive, not only politically, but physically. I was born exactly at that time. My dad, who had befriended a fellow in law school, whose name was Norman Francis, who subsequently became the president of Xavier University and won the Medal of Honor from President Bush, they both grew up together and raised their children together. Race is always... and the fight for racial equality has been a part of our DNA for as long as I can remember and my neighborhood was really a reflection of that.

I went to a parochial school right down the street, me and my eight brothers used to walk to school. St. Matthias was the name of the school. I subsequently went on to Jesuit High School and then to Catholic University of America. All of my brothers and sisters live in and around the City of New Orleans and have been voluntarily, involuntarily, part of this march towards what President Obama always affectionately refers to as a more perfect union. It's kind of informed who we are and generally what we do.

Kelly Brownell:

I could imagine there must have been some considerable pushback the way you've tackled some of these issues of race and equality.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

Well, I think that it's race is a very difficult issue for the country. Although we've made tremendous progress and I think that we have made tremendous progress... For those that don't believe that, they should listen to John Lewis talk about it. He says to some of our younger colleagues these days who act like we haven't made it very far, he reminds people where he was on the Edmund Pettus Bridge and what it was like back in the day and the sacrifices that people really made. The fact that now he's a Congressman and we have our first African-American president, almost on every measure, the African-American community, and not just for them but for everybody, is doing better and we're much further along. However, I think it would be naive for anybody to suggest that we're in a post-racial America. I mean, a year ago before this presidential race really fermented, that was maybe a debatable point, but it's certainly not debatable today given the tenor of this election.

I think that, and I feel very strongly about this, you cannot go around this issue. You can't go under it. You can't go over it. You got to go right through it and it requires people of good heart and good mind to talk to each other and to separate issues of race from other issues. I don't think we do that as well as we should. I think that we actually took a lot of step backward during this last presidential race. I think we've got to choose to do something differently going forward. So, as mayor, I mean, obviously I've been the mayor for seven years now, we've done a lot of our work pre- this election.

One of the things that really bothered me is the homicide rate between young African-American men. Number one, there's too much violence on the streets of America. I've given people a startling statistic, but it's true. 630,000 approximately American citizens have been killed on the streets of America since 1980. Now, I just want everybody to sit and just pause and think about how big that number is, and tell you that it's more individuals... American soldiers that were killed in all of the wars since the beginning of the 20th century. So, that's a lot of death and we walk by that. In the City of New Orleans, obviously because one of my responsibilities is public safety, not only carjackings and robberies and the kind of things that you see in urban centers, but murder as well. In the United States of America, even though we successfully reduced the murder rate by half since 1996 and the crime rate is substantially down, we will still see fairly substantial crime in particular neighborhoods throughout the United States and I wanted to address that issue.

Now, this was before the Black Lives Matter movement started publicly. That movement is, in my opinion, a movement that deals with the issues of the equal application of law in the criminal justice system. Many, many, many good points are made about the disparate treatment that African-Americans have in the penal system, the way some police departments and some police officers treat African-Americans, and there are legitimate issues surrounding that. But one of the issues that I believe should be part of that is the number of deaths of young African-American men who were victims of violent crime and murder. Young African-American men make up about 3% of the population, they're 40% of the victims of crime. I want to focus on both of those things, not just one. Very complicated thing to talk about because as soon as you start talking about that, people say, "Oh, you're trying to excuse the disparate treatment." No, not in New Orleans.

As a matter of fact, we invited the federal government to come in and apply two consent decrees, both to our jail and to our police department, to make sure that our police department does what it's supposed to do when it's supposed to do it and how it's supposed to do it, that we actually work through the birth to prison pipeline. We are, in my mind, leading the country on both of those reforms, but it is also true that this level of gun violence on the streets of America is just, in my opinion, it's unacceptable. We need to speak to all of those issues to protect people and to give them hope and opportunity. So, I address those issues now simultaneously. I figured that people had to have a better way to talk to each other. We conceptualize something innovating about how we would do that.

Where did people really start reconciling racially? South Africa. They created something called... what we call in America the welcome table. They had other examples of things. They would call it reconciliation panels. William Winter, who used to be the governor of Mississippi, actually conceptualized this program. Now, in New Orleans, we actually have whites, blacks, Hispanics, sitting around a table, very privately, very quietly, no media, speaking through their common issues. Over the past two years, we've done really wonderful work in New Orleans with people just getting to see each other, know each other, and finding common ground.

And then on top of that, somebody came to me one day and said, "Those Confederate monuments, have you ever thought about them and what they mean? You're always talking about how New Orleans is a multicultural city, how it's an open city, how it's a tolerant city, how your city was here before the rest of America was. It was always a melting pot. Those statues don't reflect the ethos that you communicate to us about what New Orleans is about." You know what? They were right and so I went to the city council and to a number of other commissions and I told them that it was my opinion that those Confederate monuments were put up for the wrong reason. Of course, historically we went and found out that there were a number of people post-Civil War who decided to put those monuments up as an affront to the United States of America basically to say that the war was never won, that the Confederacy was never going to yield. Those statues were put up in defiance of the freedom of most Americans. I just think it's not reflective of who we are as a community.

And because those things are on public space and they're in spaces of reverence, as opposed to in a museum where they can be looked at and understood in context, we decided to take them down. Now that matter is stuck in court right now. Hopefully we'll be getting a decision anytime. But my opinion as the mayor of the City of New Orleans is that I'm building a city post-Katrina of the future, not the past. Now, I don't want to ignore history. You can't possibly ignore history. History is history, but when you write history, you ought to write it in its appropriate context and this is not contextualized appropriately. I think that these common spaces and these spaces of reverence ought to be saved for things that are unifying and not things that tearing us apart and so we're going to take them down.

Kelly Brownell:

Gun violence. You've said that the murder of a nine-year-old boy, James Darby, made the issue of gun violence personal to you. How was this so?

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

First of all, James, I think he was eight when he was killed, eight or nine, got killed at a park named A. L. Davis Park. It was named after a civil rights leader. The park is right across the street from where Dr. King began the Southern Christian leadership conference that began the civil rights movement. This little boy, I think this happened in 1994 if I'm remembering correctly, around thereabouts, had written a letter to President Clinton and said, "I'm really afraid. There's guns going off. I'm afraid I'm going to get killed." Before that letter reached the president, eight days later, it was Mother's Day and James had gone to A.L. Davis Park for a Mother's Day picnic. He got involved in a pickup football game and he accidentally elbowed a little girl in the eye. She ran off unbeknownst to everybody. She was pregnant and she was 14. She went home and told her brother that she got elbowed in the eye.

The brother just happened to be... He was 19 at the time, his name was Michael, was in the apartment with his mother's boyfriend who had just gotten released from Angola, which is our maximum security penitentiary. The mother's boyfriend told the kid, "You can't let anybody disrespect your family like that. You've got to take care of business." Now, Michael... I mean, Joseph was his name, I'm sorry, took his little brother, Michael, with him. Got in a car and brought a shotgun with him and went back to avenge the sister's inadvertent elbow in the eye. Put the shotgun out of the car, pulled the trigger, and he killed James. So, James dies. Then, of course, Joseph is arrested and his little brother, Michael, who was 14 at the time, I think Joseph was 19, were both arrested.

Michael is a juvenile. Joseph is an adult. Joseph today is in Angola penitentiary. I visited him about six months ago because I wanted to talk to him about what he did and why he it and what he was thinking about. James is gone. We don't ever know what would have happened in his life. We don't know whether he would have been a doctor or whether he would have been a killer. Joseph is in jail and we spent about a million dollars putting Joseph in jail and we're going to spend another million before the time he leaves. I mean, to me, that really encapsulizes everything that's happened in the City of New Orleans and all around the country as it relates to violence. I don't think that the country has come to grips with honestly what the causes of it are, how you stop it, how you affect it.

Now, we get into these issues about guns. Are you for the Second Amendment? You against the Second Amendment? Are you for reasonable regulations? Are you not? That's a worthy discussion to have, but it's not the only discussion. It's not the only thing that's going to stop violence, which I think is as much a public health threat as it is a public safety threat. I just believe in my gut because we're in the United States of America, we're the greatest country in the world, we've sent a man to the moon, we're trying to construct a ship to go to Mars... If we can solve those problems, we can solve this problem. This is not an unsolvable problem. You can interrupt violence the way you interrupt a health threat or a virus. I just don't think we've spent as much time on it as we should and many reasons is because these young kids don't really have anybody advocating for them.

Kelly Brownell:

I'd like to come back to that interruption in violence that you mentioned.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

Sure.

Kelly Brownell:

But before we do that, what was that like visiting that individual in prison?

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

It was incredible. When you don't know what you're doing, when you're trying to find an answer, you just talk to as many people as you can about what's going on. I had spent a lot of time with criminologists and police chiefs. I decided to go ask the kids who was shooting each other why they were doing it. We created something and it's called Cafe Reconcile, which is actually a workforce training program for kids that wanted to quote unquote, get out of the life. So, I talked a lot to them, but they weren't in jail. They had been arrested for certain things and gotten out and they were just kind of off direction.

I wanted to talk to killers and guys that had killed other people, so I asked the warden if he would let me go, and he did. I went up there and I asked everybody to leave the room, all the guards, all the security, everybody, out of the room. I had 10 guys in there that were from New Orleans, from the neighborhoods like my neighborhood that I grew up in. Remember you asked me about Prieur Street? My neighborhood was a lower to middle class neighborhood. A lot of these guys came out of the same neighborhoods that I came out of, but I couldn't understand why they did what they did. I wanted to hear directly from them about what it was. I had talked so much about James Darby over all of my years in the legislature, I realized that I was actually in the same space where Joseph was. I never really thought about meeting him before I got there.

The second I stepped onto that property, I asked the warden, I said, "Can you check and see if Joseph Norfleet is here?" He came back, he said, "Actually, he's right down the street. Would you like to meet him?" I said, "Yeah, I really want to talk to him." He didn't know that I was there and he didn't know that I was going to talk to him. He was part of really my just kind of personal quest to get a better sense of reality. Because, again, as I spoke of before, when you govern, you have to govern in real time and you have to have people's faces in front of you when you're constructing something that you think is going to work because it's going to have an impact on that person.

Kelly Brownell:

What did you learn from Joseph?

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

Well, I learned what I thought was how futile the act was. He doesn't know why he did it. He was angry. He had somebody that pushed his button. He wasn't thinking, and before you know it, and he was in Angola for the rest of his life. How nonsensical it is. Joseph, now... Think about it, I'm talking to a 38 year old man who's been in prison now for 19 years. He was very sober. He wasn't an angry, mean, scary young man with a gun. He was an old man with a potbelly who had kind of gray hair, even at 38, who was very sobered and said, "I just can't believe it. I'm so sorry I did what I did. I don't know why I did it." The truth of the matter is if you talk to a lot of these young men, you can never excuse their act because they took somebody's life, but you can begin to understand when you talk to all of them that they feel forsaken.

They feel lost and left alone. They never had any guidance when they were younger. Their education was subpar. They grew up in very difficult circumstances and they made bad decisions. Their impulses were such that if someone disrespects you, you've got to protect yourself. When you talk to some of these young men, they say to me, "Mayor, out here it's kill or be killed." There's a whole culture and there's a whole ethos that is not just about guns. It's about other stuff as well. Now, what was interesting, I always kind of try to find humor, is the 10 guys that I sat with were all probably about 35 years old. They had all been in jail for about 10 years and they were talking about the young kids who are out on the street today the way you would talk about... Saying, "Man, those kids, they're not like we were." I said, "What are you talking about you're not? Y'all killed somebody and y'all are in." He said, "Yeah, but these guys are much colder than we are. Their sense of life's value is much, much, much thinner than even ours was at the time."

Look, this is a very complicated issue, but it's not one that you can just arrest your way out of. That's going to be of some benefit. I feel very strongly about this, that there are guys out there that are really bad and they're going to hurt somebody. They're going to kill somebody else or are they going to kill a bystander? Those individuals that have no regard for anybody else's life have to be apprehended and they have to be put in jail, but there's a whole group of people out there that you can definitely stop from getting to that point. There are a whole group of other folks out there that early interventions, early childhood education, good nutrition, strong families, good coaches, good pastors, you can move those kids in a completely different direction. I think it's a combination of all of those things that will take us to a new place.

But if we don't recognize it as a problem or we don't think it's important or we don't think those particular lives matter, then all of a sudden you just walk by it because we basically have been for the past 35 years. I think the country's worse for it. I think it's worth taking a very, very serious look at and getting past all the rhetoric and thinking about it from a public health prism as opposed to just a public safety prism. I think pretty thoughtful people can come up with an answer that works with the right resources.

Kelly Brownell:

What sort of programs and policies are you working on in this space?

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

Wow. Well, again, as I said, find a problem, fix a problem. We have something in New Orleans that we've called NOLA, New Orleans, Louisiana, for Life, which is our umbrella term for all of the things that we're doing. I think the most important thing is that each one of these kids' lives matter, that drives everything that we do. Understanding that in order to approach this, it has to be a public health approach and a public safety approach. The first thing we did was from the public safety perspective, how do you secure the streets? How do you identify who the guys are that are the bad guys that are likely to shoot or get shot? Now, remember the stats show that 88% of these guys know each other. So, that means they're operating in the same space. They may not be part of the gang like the Medellin Cartel or the Cali Cartel, but they're part of a small group of guys that find fellowship, just like everybody does, hanging out together, and so they do stupid things together. We've identified about, I don't know, 3000, mostly young men in New Orleans, which is a very small percentage of the community, they're committing most of the crime.

We've created something in the police department called the multi-agency gang unit that's got federal officials, state officials, local officials in the same room with the same amount of intelligence. We know those guys and they know we know them. We bring them in to the courtroom. It's called the group violence reduction strategy where I speak to them directly and tell them, "Look, we really love you guys. We want you all to be okay. But if you're going to act badly, we're going to put you in jail for the rest of your life. It's just really that simple. Now, you can choose today and I'll put you in the front of the line. If you go to this side of the courtroom, you can meet with Sister Anne. You can meet with the mental health providers, the substance abuse providers, the economic opportunity folks. We'll get you a job. We'll get you training. But if you walk out of here and you pick up a gun, we're going to find you. If we catch you, we're going to put you in jail for the rest of your life." In the last three years, we've put away about 120 very dangerous people that have been responsible for the deaths of a lot of people because we wanted them to know that the rules of engagement change and that actions have consequences, and if you commit a bad action, you're going to have a bad consequence.

But you got to be able to deliver on that promise, so you've got to have your criminal justice system working as well as you can. Now, ours is not perfect and we have a long way to go, but we have been able to deliver very clearly on those kinds of promises. So, now hopefully people are changing their behavior. Now, once you get past that group and you get passed into another whole cohort of young men that are not engaged in that kind of activity but could be doing lesser stuff, but then are looking for a job, we've created job training programs. We created in partnership with a national organization called Strive, a, for the most part, an intensive executive management course on soft skills... How to show up on time, how to be dressed on time, how to interview, how to be disciplined at work, those kinds of things. We've asked anchor institutions, universities, hospitals that have anchor buildings in the city, to give all of these individuals the opportunity to apply for a job and then to push them into work. We've done that.

We've worked hard on the recreation program because a lot of other kids that are never really going to go into the criminal justice system but could have, they didn't have anything else to do. We've created really wonderful spaces. When we used to have five pools during the summer, now we have 13. When 100 kids used to go to summer camp, now we have 7,000. When a couple of kids used to learn how to swim, now we've taught a bucket load of people how to swim. We give them different alternatives, football, basketball, soccer, et cetera. And then we have midnight basketball, that disparaged thing that Congress laughs about all the time. It works really, really well.

It really is great to have thousands of kids in the gym on Friday and Saturday night playing basketball because guess what? That's not just why we have them there. Before they start to play, guess what? They have to listen to the police chief talk to them. They have to listen to the university president. They've got to listen to a successful businessman. Then we give them competitions and it gets to be a pathway to another thing. Lots of those young men have come along and said, "Man, I want to go get my CDL and drive a truck. I want to go work for the sewage and water system." We put them through and use that as a portal.

All of those different things laid on top of each other have allowed us, in my opinion, to keep the violence in New Orleans lower than it otherwise would have been had we not gotten... Now, look, we've got a long way to go. But I think this program that we have in place, some of which we borrowed from other cities that we brought into the City of New Orleans and kind of made our own, has proven its worth. It just needs a lot more people and a lot more resources and it needs to be [inaudible 00:22:55] sustained over time for that to be meaningful success.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you so much for joining us. Remarkable stories you have to tell and it's incredible how inspired the actions are that you're taking, so thank you for joining us.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

You're welcome.

Kelly Brownell:

My guest has been New Orleans mayor, Mitch Landrieu. Mayor Landrieu's visit to Duke kicks off a new innovator in residence program here at the Sanford School of Public Policy. The program is supported by benefactors Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel and Carl Spielvogel. You can find out more at our website, policy360.org. Till next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.