

Something Extra EP 048 – Dan Isom

Lisa Nichols: Today we welcome Dan Isom to the show. Dan is Executive Director of the REJIS Commission and is the retired St. Louis Missouri Chief of Police. Dan, I am so excited to have you here today, thank you so much for making the time. I know you're incredibly busy, but I'm honored to have you. And the second thing I want to say is just thank you so much for your public service. You have been a public service person your whole career, and so I'm excited to talk about that today, as well.

Dan Isom: I appreciate it, thank you very much.

Nichols: So let's just jump in, because we've got a lot of things that I want to talk about today, but let's just start by telling us just a little bit about how you grew up.

Isom: So a little bit about myself, I grew up in St. Louis. North St. Louis which a lot of people hear in the news today, and unfortunately, sometimes it's associated with negative stories, but when I grew up in North St. Louis, it was a predominantly middle class African-American neighborhood, everyone walked to school, played outside and had a lot of friends, and most houses had two parent families and my mother was a teacher, my father was a firefighter, and then he later on became a Facilities Director for Parkway School District and is involved in politics a little bit, in the city of St. Louis as well, so I had a pretty typical, upbringing in North St. Louis went to Catholic schools, actually, I started in public grade school. In kindergarten and half of first grade and then my parents moved us to a Catholic school, Saint Englebert but very good school and then I was very involved in sports growing up, so I played a lot of baseball, football. And what a lot of people don't know is I play hockey as well.

So people look at me today and say "Oh he's 6'2"-6'3", obviously, he played basketball, I never played basketball. I only play it as pick up but I was really big into hockey, so I started playing hockey, I think when I was five or six years old, and played hockey through high school, like I said, grew up in North Saint Louis and then after grade school I went to Saint Louis university high school, went there for four years, and played football and played hockey there and then ultimately went to Howard University, which is at Washington DC which is historically a black college, in DC. Curiously enough, that the founder of Howard University was Major Howard, how

who fought in the Battle of Gettysburg. A lot of history in Howard University and then came back here. I started going to UMSL. So, I guess after being at UMSL, for about a year decided going the same as Police Department.

Nichols: Okay, alright, so that's what I'm wanting to talk about that. Yeah, Howard University, that's interesting. I've got a really good friend in Chicago and her daughter chose Howard. There is a rich history there.

Isom: Yeah, it's an outstanding university. Founded just after the Civil War and a lot of prominent people have come out of Howard.

Nichols: So talk to us. That kind of leads us up and... And I had said at the beginning, thank you so much for your public service because you've been in public service your whole career. You've done so many cool things and I want to dive into as much as that as we can, but... But what inspired you to become a police officer Dan?

Isom: Well, I've said this many times before, I wasn't necessarily focused on being a police officer from the beginning, but I do say that public service, I think, was in my blood because my mother was a teacher, St Louis public school teacher for I think 40 years, so serving the community for extremely long time. My father was a firefighter, I think for 10 years or so, and then he left the fire department at began working for the city of Saint Louis, he was a sort of a political figure in St Louis. He was a 27 ward committeeman for St. Louis and then ultimately he worked for about 20 years at the Parkway School District, so...

Nichols: So you grew up seeing that it was not about you, it was about what you could do for your fellow man, right? From your mom and your dad's example.

Isom: Yeah, for both of my mother and father. So, as I said, it was kind of in my blood, and even when I started college, my major was Political Science, so I had this thought process of either going into politics or going to law school. So, one of the two... But when I was at UMSL, my sister joined the police department, a year ahead of me, so she was on the police department before I came on the police department. And quite frankly at that point in time in my life, school, was not high on the calendar, in terms of my priorities. So, I think my father was just trying to give both of us out of the house and she was like, "Okay you're interested in politics and law maybe law enforcement is something that would be interesting to you. And obviously he made a good choice.

Nichols: So talk to us about that journey, because you started what? In 1988?

Isom: I started in 1988, and as I said my sister was already on the police department, but went into Academy in August of 88. And really from the start, it was really intriguing to me because it was almost like a team on a football team or a hockey team. It was a very structured which I like the Academy of regiment was very structured and I really enjoy the academic, but also the sort of physical and the mental part of law enforcement. So, the Academy at the time was about four months long and I did really well in academy. I think in terms of academically I was maybe in the top five or top 10 of the class, as we graduated from the police academy. There are a lot of people wanted it to go different places and I really wanted to go to neighborhood that I had grown up in and that I knew very well, and so I had the opportunity. You had opportunity to pick kind of where you wanted to go. At least give them a suggestion. So I picked the 8th District is an area that I grew up close to I knew a lot about it was great being able to be placed in that neighborhood now, at the time that district had a lot of problems in 1988 but I really enjoyed being there, I felt comfortable there, and it was really the start of my career.

Nichols: Okay, and so you did that you were a police officer for several years, and then talk to us about what happened next.

Isom: I was really lucky in my career to have a lot of opportunities over the course of the 20 years before I became police chief, several mentors that exposed me to being a detective. I worked in the Police Academy, of course worked on the street as a supervisor as a manager and also worked in Internal Affairs. At 20 years, I actually had gone back to school because I left UMSL to become a police officer but at that time in that 20-year span, I had completed my master's degree, and also a PhD and so I was really sort of at this point where at 20 years trying to decide what I was going to do and the Chief at the time, decided to step down to retire at that point in time. I really didn't think that I was the person to be chief police. I actually had never really thought about being chief police, and really didn't think I had any shot at being chief of police with 20 years on. because typically in law enforcement although in most careers 20 years is a long time and the law enforcement from a command level it's not.

Nichols: Yeah, you were younger in your career to be a police chief.

Isom: I was 41 years old, and the other candidates were all in their mid-50s and had a 30-Plus years on the police department, but there were a lot of people who were encouraging me saying

that I think this is your time, I think you're what the police department needs. And I still wasn't really convinced at the time, but one of the things I would encourage everyone to do if they're faced with a difficult decision is to really just kind of take a retreat or so to think about why you want to do something, what you can really offer that could make a difference throughout my education.

I thought a lot about policing of course, and written a lot of things, and so I had a lot of ideas and so I really wrote out almost a 25 page sort of guide as to what I would do, what I would do if I were police chief. And as a result of that, I sort of convinced myself I can do this, I got something to offer, so... And so I threw my hat in the ring and it started the process. So I did become the chief of police and really that process that journey all the way through I think really prepared me for that all that I'd done in the past, the diversity of jobs that I had within the police department, the education that I had gained the relationships that I fostered it really gave me a guide post to where I wanted to go, I think, on October 16th, 2008, I was selected as chief of police, and took over at the St. Louis Police Department.

Nichols: There's so much packed in there. Dan, I love the fact that you did not think that you even had a chance. And that just shows me your humility, I also love the fact that you took the time people were encouraging. You and so you took the time to step back and say, "You know, if I were, what I would do? And really taking the time to kind of build that out. And then as you said after you did that, you're like... Yes, I do have something to offer, but I just love you have a servant's heart, you do and I love that.

Isom: Yeah, I think that humility really helps you... Because I think one of the reasons why I was selected is because, I didn't take for granted the opportunity and the responsibility. I took it very seriously. And then that final interview with the board really, whether I got it or not, I felt I was prepared that I had something to offer, whether they liked it or not, it was up to them, but I think I delivered it with passion and with a lot of thought and I think that really was a thing that sealed the deal.

Nichols: Well, I love that there's a lot for people to take away there. So talk to me just a little bit because in today's world we have got to be so careful. We could build our culture can we not the culture is either toxic or it is one where people want to be there and people feel valued and appreciated but there were core values at the police department. Can you speak into that a little bit? And they weren't just words on the wall. How did you take what you guys had said here are our core values and flush that out in the day-to-day. Can you talk a little bit about that, Dan?

Isom: Yeah, so one of the items of course, is leadership, and I think from a law enforcement standpoint, we are really the face of government. No one interacts I think with more government than the police, right? We're there 24 hours a day. You see us all the time. If something happens, you call us. And so people's perception of what government is about, oftentimes come from the police and we are in that leadership role where we can demonstrate the best parts of government, the best parts of America really and so we've got to kind of carry that with us, in everything we do. The other part is, fairness to all which is so important in law enforcement, I've always said that our criminal justice system really depends on people trusting the system right from the beginning to the end. Most of police work is solved by people engaging in the process.

I was an officer for 20 years. And you generally don't see stuff as you're driving around. People call you and they tell you, and so they've had to have trust and confidence that you're going to... Do the right thing. And so, even you get the information from them and then they may file a report or they may be a witness, and then they've got the trust that you're going to follow through with that. They've got to come down and give testimony to the prosecutor. They've got to go to court. Jurors have to have trust that a police officer saying it's true on the stand, because oftentimes they're the only person who's given testimony. And so, that leadership and fairness to all is as important as core values to police culture.

Nichols: Yes, and when people see that demonstrated that is when the trust barometer, goes up, when they see that. Well, very good.

AD: We're going to take a quick break and then we'll be right back with Dan.

Nichols: Dan, after you had retired as the Chief of Police, you were appointed by Governor Nixon to the Ferguson Commission. And some people that are listening may not even understand what that was. There were 16 of you guys, right? It was a volunteer, you weren't paid for this, but what was the Ferguson Commission and what was the purpose and the mission behind it?

Isom: Really, the purpose and the mission behind it, was Governor Nixon wanted to collect a diverse group of people that represented the diversity of St. Louis to really think about how we could re-shape our community, our region and what are the things that we need to do to progress, to make St. Louis and the region, the best that it could be.

I think a lot of people thought it was limited to the Mike Brown incident, but it was much more than that, it was looking at education, it was looking at economic opportunity, it was looking at housing, transportation, all of those things that you really need for a community to thrive. And really the goal was to reach out to each corner of the St. Louis Region and hear from people directly about what they thought would be the best pathway forward for the St. Louis region. And for me, it was one of the greatest experiences that I've ever had, being able to listen to so many different people and their ideas about how we could make St. Louis really great for everyone. It was a lot of pain and anger and comments about what we needed to do, but out of that, all of that sort of constructive conflict, I believe, came some really good ideas and a blueprint for how to move forward in the St Louis region.

Nichols: Yes, I so agree. And I just remember so much of it because of our sunshine law and the transparency of government, the promise that we had to the Missouri citizens, right? You guys really were just so transparent and open and collecting where they are. What does a day in the life look like for you and how can we improve that?

Isom: Yeah, I think that was so important. Starsky Wilson and Rich were both the co-chairs of the commission, and they really did an excellent job as leaders. I think from the starting point, they wanted to make sure that this was sort of a living document that didn't die and had a legacy and so they started with the premise of how do we make sure that this lives on right and one of the goals and the ways in which they did that was to be transparent, to make it something that was not really the 16 members of The Ferguson Commission, they wanted to be, the people's document and I think that was reflected. There are many commissions that I've started and of course, oftentimes the final document is placed on a shelf. And I think the reason for that is that it isn't the people's document, it's a group of people who've gotten in the room and decided this is the way that we're going to move forward. And the Ferguson report was anything but that. I still see that people are using it every day, as a guide whether it's a private organization, a public organization, I think everyone still uses it as a way of saying Hey, are we doing the things that the community said that we needed to do.

Nichols: Yeah, no, I love that. It's kind of that guide post, like you talked about before. So let's talk about you're the executive director for REJIS which stands for the regional Justice Information Service. And some people in our listening audience may not even understand what REJIS is or even know that there is a REJIS. Can you talk a little bit about the mission of REJIS?

Isom: We often talk about regionalism in St. Louis and there are a lot of good examples of that and that we want to move forward and doing more. But Regis is one of the hidden gems in terms of regional collaboration that's been around for almost 40 years, it's formed by St. Louis City and County, the whole idea of REJIS was to share criminal justice information across boundaries, and so we house and collect a lot of the criminal justice information in the St. Louis region, and also in the Kansas city region that would be jails, courts, law enforcement information, prosecutor information. It's used in two ways.

I mean, of course we develop custom applications for operations, so if an officer wants to write a ticket or arrest, booking, moving a case through the court system, those applications have been developed by REJIS but it's also a platform for agencies to share information, right. It's extremely important in law enforcement. So we've been around for 40 years and working in the community, so it's still in that space of public service that I'm in, but I'm really enjoying what I'm doing.

Nichols: I'm just thinking, technology really can help improve the whole experience can't it and the outcomes of police officers in the criminal justice system.

Isom: It truly can in a lot of different ways, of course, it can help in terms of public safety where we are keeping people safer, but I think the other thing that people don't understand with technology is that it also allows for greater fairness within the process as well, because there is just the movement of information through the system, if that is more efficient. People get a fair trial, they're not held in custody longer than they need to be. There are a lot of aspects of technology that not only lead to better enforcement and public safety, but a more equitable criminal justice system as well.

Nichols: Yeah, I've got a friend Dan Roberts that says, that technology is the engine of all businesses. And so you think about... we know what happens when something does not have an engine, it doesn't go very fast, so you're able to go much faster, and certainly more efficient and effective, it's more effective when you can add technology in there, so that's precisely what you're doing now, which is wonderful. So let's talk a little bit about something extra. Tell me about somebody in your life that had a something extra. And what do you think that something extra was... How did that play out in that person's life?

Isom: Well, I did speak a little bit about my father, and I think about leadership, he is really my example of leadership, he's really been a public servant all of his life. I mean, he started out as a

firefighter, and even during that time... He was involved in city politics involved in the Boy Scouts, he managed a softball team. There's just so many different things he did in a leadership role that really gave me an example of... And this is the model of my school me and for others. I think that's really... My father played in his life an example that he gave me. And really, that's the model of my Jesuit High School is me and for others, and so... And I had to... give something extra that would be... what resonates with me.

Nichols: It was not about him, was it Dan?

Isom: No, and it really has never been about him. I think at many points in his career he probably could have done something in the private sector, not that... Not the private sector is not for others. I could have just gone to make a whole lot more money, but I think his life was really centered on this public service. And not that you can't do that from a private sector standpoint, but certainly in his life, I think that's what his mission was about.

Nichols: Well, he certainly said a great example. Did any for you and for your older sister, and for many others out there that his life is touched? So thank you so much, He sounds like a great man. So Dan, talk to me a little bit about a particular board. You're on several boards, but one board in particular that's very close to your heart that you are chairing an initiative for is Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Can you talk a little bit about that?

Isom: So when I was chief there were so many different times where organizations would come to us and say, we really think it would be great for the police department and the community of officers served as mentors, it was always something that I thought was a great idea. And so we developed a partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters to build a program where officers could be mentor to young men and young women, and we have really developed that into going beyond just law enforcement. So our new effort is big responders meaning that medical workers, military, fire fighters and police are thought of in our communities as leaders and people who are looked up to, and I think they are great examples for young people to aspire to.

So, we're kicking off a new program with Big Brothers Big Sisters since I'm the chair of it. It's called big responders and we're really just looking for military law enforcement, firefighters, EMS personnel who want to be mentors to young people. There's over a thousand kids who are waiting for that relationship to happen. And you know oftentimes people think that it takes a lot of time, but it really doesn't take a lot of time to invest in a young person.

Nichols: You're investing in the future. Are you not? It's an investment that is just the ROI is priceless.

Isom: Once you make that connection, it's contagious. It's hard to not be invested. And so I've got a little a Monte in a little... who is a great young man. He goes to Lions Middle School. You know, when we first started out, my wife and I co-mentor, you think it's going to take a lot of time, but it really does it mean couple of hours out of the month and then it ends up being more than that but because you want to spend time.

Nichols: I hear that all the time, you know, so many times you think, "oh you know, I'm giving but really you get more than you give. So, if someone in our listing on it is a first responder or if they're not a first responder. And what you're saying about Big Brothers Big Sisters is really resonating with them, how would they get involved?

Isom: You can go to the website. <https://www.bbbsemo.org>. There is a portal to give your information, and we'll start the process. So certainly we want first responders, but anyone who is interested in being a big to a young man or young lady please go to the website and give us your information.

Nichols: Absolutely very good. Why that portal is flooded with people that want to do that because it's such a wonderful thing that you do in there. Dan, this has just been my delight to have you here today. I can't wait for our listeners to hear your story, and thank you so much for your time,

Isom: I appreciate you, thank you for having me.