

# Los Angeles Times

## Op-Ed: As a black parent, I need to update ‘the talk’ I have with my kids about police

By Judy Belk  
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Well, I guess black parents across America will be updating “the talk.”

You know, the one where we remind our young men and women that when they leave the safety of their homes, they have to keep their guard up, mouths shut, and hands on the wheel in even the most casual encounters with law enforcement. It’s an unfair but necessary burden we carry in the black community, one we reluctantly pass down to our children if we want to keep them alive and safe.

The talk was a painful ritual I went through with my own two kids, especially my towering 6-foot-5 son who reassured me at an early age that his way of coping with white people who seemed nervous around him was to start reading a book. He carried one with him everywhere, and that worked for me.

The “talk” in our family has always been given through a clear-eyed lens of the difficult role law enforcement plays in our communities. My brother is a retired fireman, and my sister is a retired cop, and they both had long, distinguished careers putting their lives on the line as courageous first responders. But guess what? They, too, have given the “talk” to their children, because they know firsthand that whether you’re the child of a policeman, fireman or doctor, the color of a person’s skin can make the difference between life or death.

I was relieved that my husband was in the car the first time a cop pulled my son over to inquire where he was heading. They were in an unfamiliar Southern town, where my son was moving into his first apartment to begin graduate school. Long experience — and the talk he had been given by his own father — meant my husband knew what to say and not to. Stay calm and remember the talk.

Now, however, the talk needs a reboot. In recent weeks, in separate incidents, two young, law-abiding African Americans were gunned down in their homes by white police officers. I realize now it was an illusion, but I always felt that once my kids were in their homes, drapes drawn and doors locked, they would be safe.

The history of African Americans should have taught me otherwise. We are a people who have never had the luxury of feeling safe in our homes. Our ancestors were pulled from their beds and hung on trees all over America, some for just making eye contact with white folks. Bombs were thrown in our living room windows, crosses were burned on our neatly manicured lawns, and our land and homes were taken from us time and time again by intimidation and force, with little or no compensation. We have never been safe in our homes.

But, even with this violent history, we still want to believe and hope that, while our lives don't seem to matter much these days on our neighborhood streets, in our schools, or even in our churches, surely in 2019 we can be safe within the four walls of our homes. And we want that even more for our children.

I'm sure 26-year-old Botham Jean felt safe watching television in his living room before a white off-duty police officer burst into his apartment in Dallas and fatally shot him. Afterward, she said she thought she had entered her own apartment and that Jean was an intruder. Twenty-eight-year-old Atatiana Jefferson, playing a video game with her nephew late at night in her Fort Worth home, probably thought she was safe, too; until she heard noises in her backyard and was killed in her own bedroom by a policeman, who had been asked by a concerned neighbor to make a "wellness" check after seeing an open door.

Thinking we are safe in our homes is an illusion, even in Hollywood, where I live. Earlier this year, a well-intentioned neighbor called the police to respond

to someone she thought was an intruder with a flashlight wandering in a park across the street from our house and then entering our darkened home.

The police responded, but to the wrong address. When a startled white neighbor opened the door with her terrified daughter behind her, she saw two policemen, one with his gun drawn. She quickly assured them she was safe. But, when she realized they were actually looking for our address, seeing the pointed gun, and knowing all too well the dangerous racial assumptions which are made every day by law enforcement, she quickly said: “The address you are looking for is next door. But, please, you need to know that my neighbor is black, and he’s a doctor.”

By the time the police approached our front door, the gun had been put away, but my husband was still taken aback to see two cops at his front door. He quickly explained that it had been him walking in the neighborhood park and entering our house with a flashlight. He had come home, grabbed the dog for his nightly walk and a flashlight for safety and poop retrieval; then returned home and moved through the house with the flashlight without turning on the lights as quickly as he normally would have. The well-intentioned neighbor apologized for thinking my husband was a cat burglar, and my next-door neighbor apologized for having to remind the police not to shoot the first black man they saw. For that, I was extremely grateful.

The incident unnerved me. Although I was out of town when the drama unfolded, and my husband joked he almost got shot for walking the dog, it was just another reminder that safety for my family and me is always going to be an illusion.

Recently, the L.A. Police Department offered to park an empty police car as a decoy in our neighborhood to deter crime. While having a black-and-white parked outside might make my white neighbors feel safe, it would have the opposite effect on me. These days, police cars in the neighborhood serve as one more reminder of the lost lives of Atatiana and Botham — and of the updated talk I need to have with my own young adult children.

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