



Photography: Nick Romanenko

Story by Nick DiUlio

Two alumni are presiding over the most transformative and optimistic era in Camden's recent history. As the mayor of the city and as its police chief, Dana Redd and J. Scott Thomson are leading the successful effort to restore and revitalize their hometown, vastly improving community relations and ushering in new economic growth.

Mayor Dana Redd has spent most of her adult life on a mission to revitalize her native city of Camden. J. Scott Thomson, who has been a Camden police officer for more than two decades, attended kindergarten at Camden's Sacred Heart School, and his grandparents lived and worked in the city. Over the years, the two alumni have developed a plan to restore security and community relations to the city they love. Their efforts led President Obama to praise them in May 2015 during an appearance in the city, calling Camden "a symbol of promise for the nation."

It was early 2012 and crime was a growing concern in Camden. Times were

challenging, solutions were elusive, and the city's reputation was taking a hit. It was then that mayor Dana Redd and Camden County Police chief J. Scott Thomson decided it was time they embarked on what Redd called "citizen patrols."

Every few days, Redd SBC'96 would join Thomson CCAS'94 in his patrol car and the duo would spend hours driving through the city making observations, speaking with residents, and breaking up any nefarious activity they came across. "During this period, we often spoke several times a day about incidents, victims, their families, and the things we could collectively do to help people during those traumatizing times," recalls Thomson, who's been at the helm of Camden's police force since 2008.

During these encounters, Redd demonstrated a passion that, to Thomson, was understandable. For most of her adult life, she'd been on a tireless mission to restore and revitalize her native city, and these citizen patrols were just one piece of a much larger battle she'd been fighting even before she was sworn in as mayor on January 5, 2010.

"My passion has always been to improve the quality of life for the citizens of Camden, and those community patrols were part of that," recalls Redd, who was born at Cooper University Hospital in 1968 and spent her childhood in Camden's Morgan Village neighborhood. "Spending time out in the community was a way of reminding people that just because it's Camden doesn't mean anything goes."

It was also emblematic of the important partnership that the two Rutgers alumni had formed over the years—a symbiotic relationship aimed at restoring security and community relations to the city they loved. And, like Redd, Thomson was possessed with a fervor for reform that was almost evangelical in intensity.

"This is more than just a job for me. From the day I came on the force, I saw this as a ministry, a vocation," says Thomson, a Camden cop for more than two decades who attended kindergarten at Camden's Sacred Heart School and whose grandparents lived and worked in the city. "I know these people. I know these neighborhoods. I have a lot of skin in the game because I feel as though this is my city."

With their combined commitment to change, Redd and Thomson have presided over perhaps the most transformative and optimistic era in Camden's troubled recent history.

It's been a multifaceted effort that has myriad social, political, and economic components. And one of its hallmarks has been the formation of the Camden County Police Department, which has been in place since May 2013. As a result, Camden has witnessed not only vastly improved security and community relations, but also an unprecedented spike in economic activity, drawing a wide range of public and private investments from around the region.

Faced with an unacceptable crime rate, fiscal crises, and a police culture mired in indifference, Redd and Thomson—along with several city, county, and state leaders—decided a radical change was necessary. They took the bold step of disbanding Camden's 141-year-old city police force and replaced it with a new metro department run by the county. It was neither easy nor unanimously popular at the time, but the mayor and the chief were united in their conviction that it was the right thing to do.

“The bottom line was that we needed to ensure the safety of Camden,” says Redd. “And this was how we needed to do it.”

The effort is paying off. According to Thomson, homicides have decreased citywide by more than 50 percent since 2013, and violent crime has been cut by more than 25 percent. But, says Thomson, it's the increases in other things that matter most.

“I'm talking about the increase in children riding their bicycles on the street and the increase in people enjoying their front steps. That is truly changing people's lives along with the narrative for this city on its return to prosperity,” says Thomson. “Now our greatest challenge is to build upon the momentum created by our initial progress.”

Redd and Thomson first met in 2008, shortly after Thomson had been appointed chief and Redd was serving as a member of the city council as well as New Jersey state senator for the 5th Legislative District. “Even back then, Mayor Redd was hands-on, trying to fix what is broken and make better that which works,” recalls Thomson.

When Redd became mayor in 2010, her partnership with Thomson solidified into an even more unified front. The two talked almost daily and met in person every Friday to discuss public safety and potential resources for citywide collaborations to help advance their vision for Camden's future.

“Chief Thomson came to the table with a skill set and a passion to transform this city,” says Redd. “But I knew that he had also inherited a department that was fraught with problems, and we both understood the dire need for a more sustainable solution.”

The tribulations facing Camden's law enforcement went beyond the crime statistics: Thomson was constantly combating a growing atmosphere of apathy and lethargy within his force. "There was an overall mindset that the police could do very little to prevent crime or shape outcomes," says Thomson. "And it was destroying this city."

Thomson and Redd were desperate for solutions to this crippling indifference, and there was a lot of damage to undo. Before Thomson's tenure, Camden had gone through five police chiefs in six years. What's more, the problem of absenteeism had become impossible to ignore. According to Thomson, it was not unusual for more than 30 percent of officers to call in sick on a given day. Sometimes, absenteeism reached 50 or 60 percent, and for many of the officers who did report for duty, policing Camden was about clocking in for a paycheck rather than patrolling the streets.

In addition, years of dwindling officer morale had been compounded by Camden's increasingly dire economic condition, which came to a head on January 16, 2011, when Redd announced she was laying off 168 city police officers (46 percent of the force at the time) in an effort to close a \$26.5 million budget gap.

Redd had spent several months trying to negotiate concessions with public safety unions that might have prevented the layoffs, asking cops and firefighters to pay more for their health care, freeze or reduce their salaries, and submit to periodic furlough days. But the unions wouldn't submit, and Redd maintained that she had no choice but to proceed with the firings.

"During that time, all of us had taken mandatory furlough days. That's how drastic the budget deficit was," recalls Redd. "From an organizational standpoint, we knew it was time to be practical and methodical in creating a new department."

Meanwhile, the Camden County Board of Freeholders was hard at work constructing a proposal aimed at regionalizing the county's policing capabilities. The idea was simple: why not pool the resources of Camden County's 37 municipalities to form a single, more economically streamlined police force?

Eventually the city reached a tipping point. On August 25, 2011, the county freeholders, Camden city officials, and the State entered a memorandum of understanding that set in motion the formation of the new department and the dissolution of the city force. In doing so, Governor Chris Christie committed \$10 million of state aid to the startup costs, and the state's Division of Local Government Services was assigned to oversee the transition in conjunction with the county freeholders.

Despite spirited financial and organizational backing, Redd and Thomson faced strong waves of vocal opposition. For instance, none of Camden County's other 36 municipalities wanted to get on board with regionalization. What's more, since the county force was slated to be nonunionized at the outset, the New Jersey Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) stood in firm opposition to the plan.

Regionalization continued to move forward. On May 1, 2013, Camden's city police department was disbanded and the Camden County Police Metro Division officially took over policing responsibilities in the city. At the time, the newly minted force included 155 former Camden city officers—who all applied for their jobs anew—and 106 new recruits.

“Creating the new police department was the right thing to do. But generally speaking, the right thing is seldom easy, and change has more critics and adversaries than supporters and facilitators,” says Thomson. “But Mayor Redd braved forward, even though her personal safety was threatened at times. She is one of the hardest working individuals I have ever met, and I have a tremendous amount of respect for her.”

Before, during, and after the transition, Redd recalls how she and Thomson met regularly with stakeholders in the city's neighborhoods, businesses, and faith-based communities to explain the plan in detail and assure them that their city would eventually be a safer place.

“Everyone we spoke to agreed that we had a problem. Not only did we need more police officers, we also needed officers who responded to the needs of the community,” says Redd, adding that many residents were initially nervous that the transition would lead to a temporary gap in policing. “But we listened to their concerns and worked very hard to assure them this was not the case. I'm proud of what we achieved, as are the people of the city.”

By almost every measure, Camden is a safer place than it was when Redd and Thomson first met. Crime has been on a steady decline, and last year the city witnessed the fewest incidents of the most violent forms since 1974.

The change has not only been operational, but also cultural in nature. In addition to new technologies and crime-fighting strategies, the metro force has also brought about a completely revamped approach to officer-resident engagement. Rather than officers riding around in squad cars with windows closed, Thomson implemented dozens of daily walking beats throughout the city. Now, teams of officers canvas neighborhoods on foot, keeping an eye out for “the bad guys” while also getting to know local residents and business owners.

Redd points out that increased security and community relations have also fostered a better atmosphere for economic development in the city. And [Rutgers University–Camden](#) has been an able and willing partner. In addition, Camden is set to welcome some \$2 billion in new public and private investments either currently under construction or in the near future. That includes Liberty Property Trust’s 26-acre Camden Waterfront master plan; the relocation of Subaru’s \$118 million corporate headquarters; and the \$50 million Joint Health Sciences Center, a 65,000-square-foot biomedical research facility slated to open in 2018 that will bring together Rutgers–Camden, Rowan University, and other medical and educational institutions in the city. Opening in the spring of 2017 will be the [Nursing and Science Building](#) at Rutgers–Camden, a research and teaching facility for students and faculty working in the realms of biology, chemistry, computational and integrative biology, health sciences, nursing, and physics.

“Camden doesn’t have the luxury to work on just one issue. We have to work on a number of issues at the same time,” says Redd. “That means fixing one thing must have a ripple effect on others.”

A great deal of work still remains for Redd and Thomson, and they are both quick to add that no one is resting on laurels. Redd is expending a lot of energy on workforce development in order to make sure that Camden’s residents are “trained and prepared to be local hires for the business that’s coming.”

“I enjoy being able to make a difference in the city where I was born and raised and still live. And I’m really proud people are talking about Camden in a positive light,” says Redd. “It’s wonderful to hear things like Camden is on the rise. Camden is moving forward. And Camden is a place people should pay attention to.”

Looking back on the formation of the new county police force and all of its ancillary benefits, Thomson often marvels at the enormity of what was accomplished. It would not have been possible, he says, without Redd’s leadership.

“There was no blueprint for what we were doing. In fact, a move of that magnitude in such a challenging environment had never been attempted,” says Thomson. “Navigating uncharted waters requires the leadership to have their hands upon the wheel at all times, and the mayor was an incredible partner in helping guide the ship along the rocky shoals.”

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