

# We will be the blueprint

*Detroit's Chief of Police James E. Craig talks about the city's comeback despite high crime and financial troubles*

By Keith W. Strandberg

Running a big city police department is challenging in the best of times. Piloting a department through the stormy waters of municipal bankruptcy is a task most daunting. *Law Enforcement Technology* contributor Keith W. Strandberg spent some time in Detroit and came away impressed—by the city, its renewal and, most of all, its Chief of Police, James E. Craig.

Craig started his law enforcement career in Detroit in 1977 and, after stints in Los Angeles (28 years), Portland, Maine and Cincinnati, came back to helm the Detroit PD in July 2013. Craig has a Bachelor of Science degree in business management from West Coast University, a Masters of Management in Public Administration from the University of Phoenix, and is currently doing coursework in a doctoral program. In addition, Craig is a graduate of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Academy.

**LET: Why did you get into policing?**

**Craig:** I entered into law enforcement for the same reason most people do, I wanted to help people and to do some good in my community. I have worked alongside some of the finest men and women in Detroit, Los Angeles, Portland and Cincinnati, all of whom want to help people and serve their communities, to stand up for people

who can't stand up for themselves. Without men and women like these doing what they are passionate about, this world would be a darker place than it is today.

**LET: What is your policing philosophy?**

**Craig:** I believe we are all in this together. In any department I have ever worked, I have never met an officer who wears a cape. I have never met an officer who has super powers. We as police officers need help from the community, from the media, and help from each other. In order to get that help, we need to let society know that we are here for them, that we stand shoulder to shoulder with them in this fight. We must strive to be transparent. We must not be afraid to let people see our flaws; it's what makes us human. If we can communicate on a common level with the community then we bridge that gap between the citizens and the police department.

**LET: What is your opinion of the City of Detroit?**

**Craig:** Let's be honest; Detroit is hurting right now. We have an unacceptable level of crime, the criminals have gone unchecked for years and we face a devastating financial crisis. We as a city and a department have been mistreated and misrepresented.

Having said that, there is no place I would rather be, there is no other community I would rather serve and there is no better department I would rather lead than the men and women in Detroit. We have the opportunity to do and be something great, to show the world the fighting spirit that has become synonymous with Detroiters.

**LET: What do you feel is the secret of your success?**

**Craig:** I feel the key to my success, amongst many things, has been the fortune to be mentored by masters of the craft such as New York Police Commissioner Bill Bratton. He taught me so much about the relationship between a police department and the citizens it serves. I've said it before; we are all in this together.

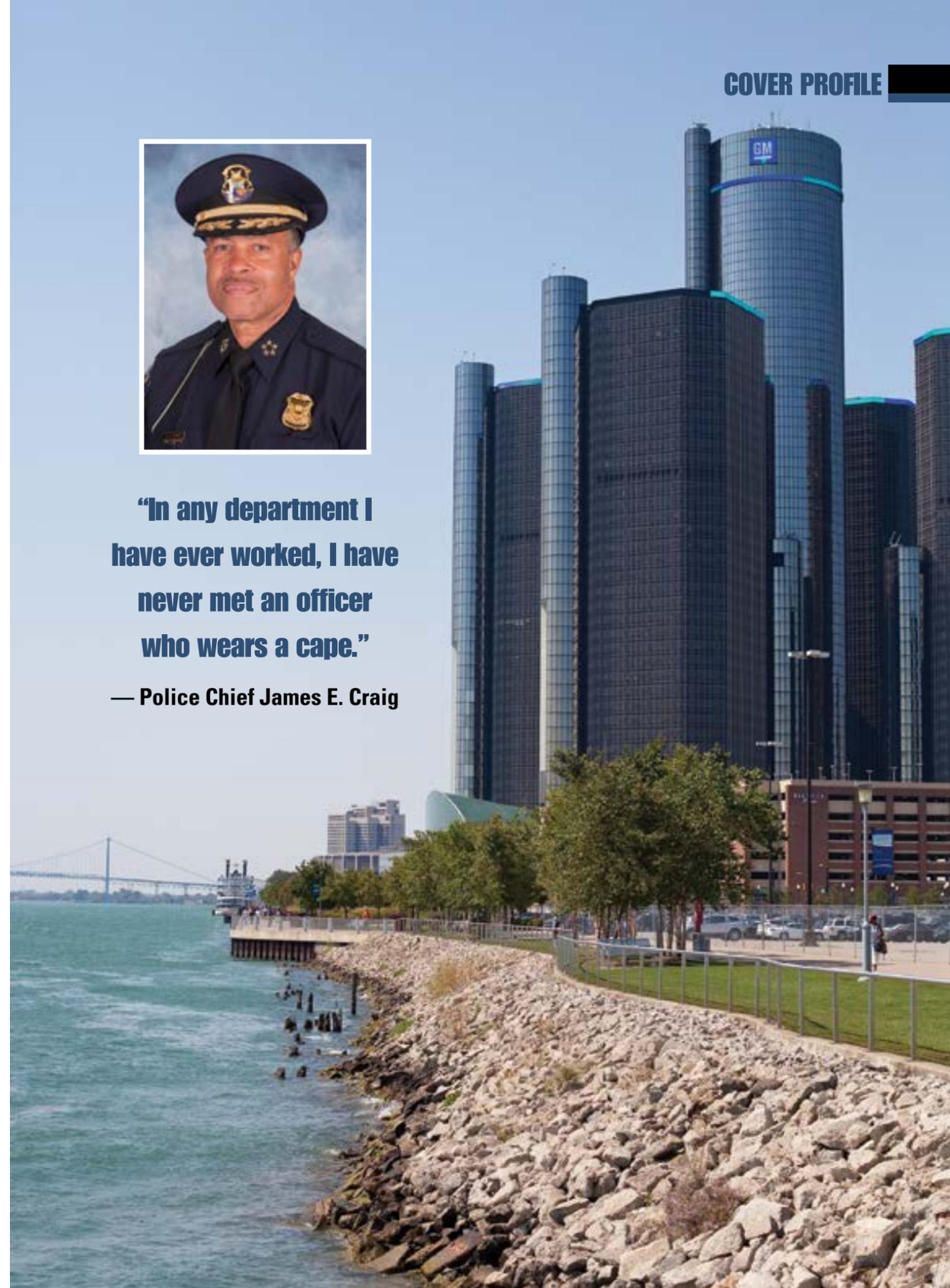
**LET: What do you like about your job?**

**Craig:** Every day I come in there are always a new set of challenges to overcome, but they are all challenges that I am happy to accept. It's like a mechanic who rebuilds a classic car—every day he completes a project and gets closer and closer to the finished product. Once the end result is in sight, it becomes that much more exciting. It's that excitement that keeps me coming in, day after day. Plus I get to work with an amazing group of people.



**“In any department I have ever worked, I have never met an officer who wears a cape.”**

— Police Chief James E. Craig



**LET: What don't you like?**

**Craig:** The naysayers who say we'll never do it, who say the people of Detroit will never dig themselves out of the hole they are in. I make it my mission to prove them wrong a little more every day.

**LET: What are the biggest challenges facing the department?**

**Craig:** When I became chief, officer morale was lower than any department I have ever seen. You cannot expect an officer to work as hard as a Detroit police officer has to work, when they are given a 10 percent pay cut, forced to work a 12-hour shift and given limited resources to do a job that could very well get them killed.

Since I've been here, I have eliminated 12-hour shifts, I have worked vigorously to get them the resources they need to do their job, and I have

tried to show our officers that they are respected and not expendable.

**LET: What are the unique challenges of operating a police department in a city that has declared bankruptcy?**

**Craig:** As you would expect, funding is an issue. We have been very fortunate in that several large corporations have been very generous to the city and its public safety departments. We have received several brand new scout cars and EMS rigs donated by these businesses.

Even with those donations, the department is still facing challenges. Officers received a 10 percent wage cut, facing major cuts to their health care and also hits to their pension plans. The hits keep coming, but what amazes me is their dedication to their profession and the citizens of the city.

I am trying to address morale by tak-

ing care of some the smaller issues that seem trivial to some, but play a significant role in overall productivity.

**LET: Any advice you have for other chiefs/managers facing similar fiscal issues?**

**Craig:** Put together a support staff that can assist you in getting the job done. Make sure everyone has the same goal and the ability to achieve that goal. It is unfortunately too common for people to be in a position of authority who do not have the capability to be in that position. Remember, you can't do it alone. Look to those individuals to run their respective commands. The Captain that is in charge of the precinct should be responsible for not just crime, but every other aspect including the fiscal operations of that precinct. Fiscal responsibility is every member's responsibility.



Parts of Detroit are crumbling while other areas are positively thriving, making the city an interesting study in contrasts, and very challenging to police.

**LET: What are the key initiatives of the Detroit PD?**

**Craig:**

1. Decrease overall violent crime

2. Improve response times
3. Re-establish a relationship with the community
4. Make the city safe for the men, women and children who live, work and play in Detroit.

**LET: What would people be surprised to find out about the Detroit PD?**

**Craig:** I think people would be surprised to know the work load that the officers handle every day. I know when people read about this agency in the papers we are usually painted in a negative light. I cannot stress how much that does not represent the totality of the department. There are so many hard working, caring and dedicated officers under my command, officers who will go that extra mile to make sure families feel a little safer in their homes.

I think it would surprise the public to know that there really has been no stabil-

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## COVER PROFILE

ity in this department for years. These are some of the issues that I would like to bring to the light and resolve.

### **LET:** What are your priorities regarding criminal activity?

**Craig:** Obviously all criminal activity is a top priority. We need to become more

open with citizens, so they will become more open with us. We need to place a priority on going out into neighborhoods and communicating with the community. We need citizens to speak up when crime is happening. We need to eliminate this “no snitching” culture and get the community involved. When

we can do that, we can close in on crime from all angles.

We have been working hard to show the community that we are taking back the streets of Detroit, not just for them, but with them. I think that they have seen the change in their new police department and they are beginning to open up. They want more, they want to have a say and they want to help. I think they are excited to see a police department fighting with them.

### **LET:** Are you hiring?

**Craig:** Hiring in the department is moving forward. We have an academy class graduating... [and] a class of new recruits just [recently] started. Obviously it may be a little harder attracting viable candidates due to the condition of the city’s financial situation, but that will not deter us from finding only the absolute best candidates to serve on the force.

### **LET:** Where will the department be in five years?

**Craig:** There is no doubt in my mind that we will be the blueprint for every metropolitan police department across America. I believe that everything we are doing will send a strong message to the criminal element everywhere—that their time has passed, that if you want to continue your wrongdoings then you will be sought after, you will be found and you will be brought to justice. This is the message from all Detroiters and their Detroit PD.

### **LET:** What would you like to be remembered for?

**Craig:** I guess I would like to be remembered as a man who lived every day of his life working hard to make the world a better place than the day before.

Many thanks to Chief Craig, as well as to the public information officers for making this interview happen. ■

*Keith W. Strandberg is an American freelance writer and award-winning screenwriter/producer of feature films living in Switzerland. As a former contributing editor for LET more than a decade ago, he is happy to return to the magazine.*

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