



SPOTLIGHT

SHERIFF DAWANNA S. WITT HENNEPIN COUNTY SHERIFF (MN)

We recently had the opportunity to speak with Sheriff Dawanna S. Witt, who leads the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office in Minnesota, and WOW. She's grounded, real, and deeply connected to the community she serves. Her leadership is shaped by life experience, and she's bringing a refreshing sense of purpose to the role. She grew up in south Minneapolis, giving her a deep, personal connection to the community she now serves. She's also the first woman and first person of color elected to serve as sheriff in Hennepin County. It's a milestone, but it's how she leads that really matters.

FROM SKEPTIC TO PUBLIC SERVANT

Sheriff Witt didn't grow up trusting law enforcement. In fact, her early experiences left her with a belief that people in uniform couldn't be trusted. "As a kid, bad policing stays with you. You grow up thinking anyone with a badge is a bad person."

Everything changed when she joined a friend, a juvenile probation officer, on a tour of the county jail. She learned how the jail supported women—especially women of color—working as detention deputies. "I thought, this isn't what I saw growing up. So I made a complete career change, from therapist to detention deputy." That decision changed her life—and her perspective. "I had to work with law enforcement. And that's when the barriers started to break down. I realized, not all of them are what I thought."

TESTED EARLY, FOCUSED ALWAYS

Stepping into the role of sheriff, not everyone knew what to expect. And some tested her right away.

"Within a week of taking office, I got a message from someone who's been in law enforcement nearly 30 years. He asked if I really thought I'd be in this role if I weren't a woman or Black." She responded with facts—about her education, her experience, and her qualifications. The message went unanswered.

“ I've learned people make assumptions. But I just stay focused on doing the work. ”

– Sheriff Dawanna S. Witt,
**Elected Sheriff | Hennepin
County Sheriff's Office**



LEADING WITH INTENTION—AND HEART

Sheriff Witt leads from a place of deep personal connection. Her experiences growing up, and the people she needed to see back then, guide how she shows up today.

“My greatest fear isn’t the danger of the job, it’s overlooking someone who needs to feel safe. That’s a lonely place to be. And I know what that feels like.”

She encourages deputies to break the mold, not fit into it. “I used to tell new school resource officers, ‘Don’t be who they think you’re going to be.’”

SHOWING WHAT’S POSSIBLE

Witt often tells her story, not to make it about her, but to make space for others.

“I used to say I got here by accident. But now I know this is my purpose. It’s representation. It’s making sure people feel seen and heard.”

Even her granddaughter is watching closely: “She says, ‘You can’t spell sheriff without she.’”

ADVICE FOR WOMEN IN THE FIELD

“Know your why. Be comfortable with it. Don’t conform. Don’t compromise. You’re good enough—and you need to hear that. And don’t forget what makes you smile. This job can be heavy, but it can also be the most rewarding thing you’ll ever do.” Sheriff Dawanna Witt isn’t just running a large agency—she’s creating a new model of leadership: one shaped by lived experience, and focused on building trust. She’s not interested in checking boxes, she’s making sure no one gets overlooked.



(Brian Peterson, Star Tribune/guest)

ABOUT 30X30

The 30×30 Initiative is a coalition of police leaders, researchers, and professional organizations committed to advancing and supporting women in law enforcement, both in the U.S. and beyond.

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