



## SPOTLIGHT

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### **CHIEF DOREEN JOKERST, OVERLAND PARK POLICE DEPARTMENT**

When Chief Doreen Jokerst was 14 years old and joined the Police Explorer program in Parker, Colorado, some officers she rode with told her, “You don’t fit the norm. You don’t remind us of someone who’s going to be a police officer.” As one of the first female explorers in the department, and with no family background in policing, she found herself wondering what the “norm” was and how she was supposed to match it.

At 21, she was hired by the same department where she had served as an explorer. One of the police captains at the time, and later Chief of Police for Parker, David King, gave her a very different message: “We hired you because of who you are, and you’re truly going to make a difference in policing.” That message planted a seed that would grow throughout her 28-year career: maybe it was the norms of policing that needed to change, not her.



Today, as Chief of the Overland Park Police Department, Jokerst leads with the same authentic voice she fought to find as a young woman in a male-dominated profession. Her journey from explorer to chief reflects a leader who refused to diminish herself to fit in and who now works to ensure others do not have to either.

### EARLY CALLING

Chief Jokerst’s calling to law enforcement came early. “I was the kid who always knew I wanted to be a police officer,” she said. At age eight, during a family trip to visit her aunt in San Francisco, she toured Alcatraz. “It was incredibly impactful. I had never seen a jail before, and no one in my family was in law enforcement.”

When she told her parents she wanted to pursue a career in policing, they supported her. Her hometown offered a Police Explorer program, and she joined at 14, staying active through high school until entering the police academy at 20. “I wanted to make a positive impact in the community I serve, and I wanted to speak for victims whose voices were silenced,” she said. “As a chief of police, those ‘whys’ still resonate deeply with me.”

Her parents reinforced her commitment. They drove her to Explorer meetings, purchased her first firearm, and paid for professional firearms training. “That became the first firearm I carried when I turned 21, which was very special to me. I was fortunate to have a family that supported my career path.”

### FINDING HER AUTHENTIC VOICE

As a young explorer and new officer, Chief Jokerst wrestled with being told she did not fit the traditional mold of the police role. “When you’re 14, 15, 16, going through that, you think, what is this, and how do I become more like that? Because that’s what people want to see,” she said.

Eventually, her perspective shifted. “I decided, I am who I am. I may not fit the traditional mold of policing, but maybe it’s time for the disparities to change.”

Authenticity brought challenges. “If I took an authoritative stance, it was sometimes viewed negatively. When a male counterpart did the same, it was admired,” she said. “I could see the disparity, even though my language was thoughtful and professional.”

She also recognized the value of different perspectives. “Women often see things through a different lens, and that lens matters. Policing is changing for the better because of broader perspectives. It shouldn’t only be about arrest and citation statistics. It’s also about relationships, empathetic listening, and building trust with the community.”



### PATH TO LEADERSHIP

Chief Jokerst's original plan was to join the FBI. She earned an undergraduate degree in criminal justice and a master's degree in psychology. "Around the time *Silence of the Lambs* came out, I thought that was my path," she said. After September 11, hiring priorities shifted toward candidates with IT and language skills. Chief Jokerst noted, "These skills were not my strengths," and continued on to say, "Sometimes life redirects your path."



Her leadership philosophy was shaped early. At 21, she responded to her first death scene and was deeply affected. The response she received from supervisors stayed with her. "I was told, 'We don't have time for this, and you need to handle the next call.' There was no space to process," she said. "I remember thinking that if I ever became a sergeant, I would lead differently. I would support people as people."

When promoted to sergeant and later lieutenant, she focused on human-centered leadership and community impact. "I asked officers, how are you positively impacting someone's life? How are you practicing community policing thoughtfully?" She carried that philosophy forward into command roles, emphasizing that wearing the uniform is "a privilege, not a right."



### MENTORSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mentorship has been central to her growth, especially her relationship with Dr. Tracie Keese. As a young lieutenant and the only female command officer in her department, Chief Jokerst asked her chief for a female mentor and was connected with Dr. Keese, then a division chief with the Denver Police Department.

“She provides perspectives I haven’t considered,” Chief Jokerst said. “She has experience and knowledge I don’t have. She’ll challenge me and say, ‘Did you really do that, Doreen?’ and then help and assist me in thinking through better approaches. Those honest conversations are invaluable.”

Dr. Keese was instrumental during Chief Jokerst’s time leading at CU Boulder, particularly following George Floyd’s murder, and encouraged her to pursue a doctorate in educational equity and executive leadership.

“I realized I knew a lot about policing, but not enough about educational equity, and I was serving in a university environment,” Chief Jokerst said. “I felt a responsibility to broaden my knowledge so my decisions would be more informed and less likely to cause unintended harm.”

Today, she speaks about “making public safety work for everybody” and intentionally engaging historically marginalized and excluded communities.



### LEADING IN OVERLAND PARK, KANSAS

When interviewing for the chief position in Overland Park, Chief Jokerst approached it as a mutual evaluation. “It was as much an interview for me as it was for them,” she said. She outlined three priorities: culture, technological advancement, and community engagement.

“My priority is creating an inclusive and welcoming environment,” she said. “That has to be intentional.”

When she was selected, the department had 40 commissioned officer vacancies. “We’re down to 18 now,” she noted. “When you invest in culture and create a place where people want to come to work, it helps with both recruitment and retention.”

### INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AND EMPOWERING VOICES

Chief Jokerst is deliberate about inclusive language and systems. “Words matter,” she said. She reviews policies to remove gendered language such as “his designee” and encourages replacing terms like “manpower” with “personnel” or “staffing.”

She has also streamlined hiring processes to reduce financial barriers for applicants. “If candidates are paying for multiple flights, can we consolidate steps or use virtual options when appropriate?” she asks.

She emphasizes voice and innovation at every level. “You were hired to effect positive change. Too often in policing, we silence voices,” she said. She meets with every new officer during their hiring process to reinforce that their ideas matter.

“I tell them insatiable curiosity breeds innovation,” she said. She requires that new proposals reach her office so ideas are not filtered out by “we’ve always done it this way.”

She also explains the “why” behind decisions. “Old school policing was ‘because I said so.’ I believe in explaining the reasoning. Even if the answer is still no, people understand and respect the process.”

### NAVIGATING FAMILY AND CAREER

Chief Jokerst accepted the Overland Park position during a challenging family season. Her older daughter was beginning her senior year and committed to a Division I sport. Her husband and senior daughter remained in Colorado while she relocated to Kansas, with her younger daughter joining later.

“We had never lived as two separate households before,” she said. “My kids and husband were incredibly supportive and constantly said, ‘we’re here for you.’”



She also encountered gendered assumptions. “I heard comments like, ‘You left your family?’ or ‘I could never leave my kids.’ Her male deputy chief witnessed this and told her, “I don't think they would say that to you if you were a man. I'm really sorry people say that to you.” Chief Jokerst doesn't think people were intentionally hurtful and gives them the benefit of the doubt. “This is where I just say words matter, and try to be intentional with your wording,” she said.

Her city manager, the first female Chief Jokerst, has worked for, built out her vacation and sick time ahead of schedule. “You're going to have to make a lot of flights back and forth, and we support you. So, you don't need to start at zero. You'll have some time built in so you can go see your family when you need to,” the city manager told her.

On balance, she is candid. “People think balance means 50-50. For me, it's been 80-20 or 90-10 at times. Balance isn't the right word. It's intentional tradeoffs.”

### NAVIGATING FAMILY AND CAREER

When struggling, she has reached out to author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek, who she works with at his organization The Curve, which aims to modernize police culture from within. "Simon's motto is never cry alone." He told her, "Doreen, if you're really good at one thing, you can't always be really good at that same time at something else, and that's okay. If you spend time here, you have to spend less time there. I almost needed someone to say, "That doesn't make you a bad mom, it makes you human" she said.

"I went through the biggest parent challenge taking this job in Kansas, because I wanted to do something that fulfilled a piece of me in policing, knowing it was going to cause a challenge in my personal life," she said. Her advice to other women facing similar challenges is to focus on the opinions of the people who truly matter. "I felt very confident in the decision that I made, and I had the support of my family, so it did not matter to me what other people's perceptions were."



**curve**



### LOOKING FORWARD

Through every stage of her journey, Chief Doreen Jokerst has demonstrated what's possible when leaders refuse to diminish themselves to fit outdated norms and roles and instead work to change those for the better. From her days as one of the first female explorers being told she was different, to her current role shaping the culture and practices of a police department, she has stayed true to her values and her authentic self.

Her emphasis on inclusive language, equitable practices, and empowering every voice in her organization while building genuine trust with the community reflects a modern approach to policing that centers both the humanity of those being served and those doing the serving. As she continues her work in Overland Park, Chief Jokerst serves as a model for what's possible when leaders bring their full selves to the work, hold the door open for others, and refuse to accept "that's the way we've always done it" as an answer.





# ABOUT 30X30

The 30x30 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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## >30 FORWARD

30Forward is a Canadian initiative inspired by 30x30, advancing and supporting women in policing through research, collaboration, and culture change.

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