

William & Lonsdale – Lives in The Law

Ep 76. Ross Guenther

Voiceover: [00:00:09] This is William and Lonsdale, a podcast about the legal ecosystem and the fascinating people who make it tick. Today, your host Michael Green speaks with former deputy commissioner of Victoria Police, Ross Guenther, APM. Over his forty year career, Ross held a wide variety of roles from front line policing to training, to setting up the newly formed Counterterrorism Command in 2015, to his final role as deputy commissioner of public safety and security. Despite the breadth, depth, and seniority of the positions Ross held, it is an understatement to say that he had a circuitous route to the police force. He actually began studying law economics when he left school. And although he enjoyed his law subjects in particular, he only lasted a year before transferring to teaching, majoring in music. Then before that year was out, he was being offered so much work as a tenor saxophone player, he decided to drop out of uni and become a professional musician, which he did very successfully for the following decade. He played in the house bands of TV shows at the ABC and Channel nine, supported the biggest acts in Australia, and had the privilege of playing with many legendary international artists, including Shirley Bassey, Tina Turner, and the iconic Barry White.

Ross Guenther: [00:01:30] One story where I did a week, week of shows here at the Hilton Hotel with, with Barry White where, as you could imagine, generally, the artist wouldn't be there for the rehearsal very often. The musical director will rehearse the band. So so we didn't play through the fullness of every tune, and then we did that first show that night. And in that show, he did a version of Billy Joel's Just The Way You Are. And, of course, I thought, well, I know this song backwards, and there was a very long tenor sax solo in the middle of it. As you know, Barry has a way of delivering his product like, he sort of wanders around a bit, and I thought, oh, no. Verse chorus, verse chorus. And, you know, I did have a chart for it, but I thought, well, I know the song. I'll just come in. So I came in with a solo, but I did note that Barry was still singing. And I thought, well, I can't stop because anytime now Barry's gonna he's gonna stop and I'm due in. So I kept playing. Anyway, his son was the stage manager and one of the backing vocalists, he came up to me at the end. He said, are you the Tenors Sax? Said, yeah. He said, mister White asked tomorrow night if you could please not play when he's singing.

Michael Green: [00:02:58] Our guest this morning on Lives in the Law is Ross Guenther. Ross was formerly Deputy Commissioner of Public Safety and Security in the Victorian Police. Ross, good morning.

Ross Guenther: [00:03:08] Good morning.

Michael Green: [00:03:09] Ross, normally, of course, in having these conversations, we start in your childhood and your background, but I wanna reverse that today and start at the end, so to speak, with your position or your last two positions over the period from 2015 to 2025 when you were assistant commissioner for counterterrorism command and deputy commissioner of public safety and security for Victoria Police. Can you just flesh out for us what those positions entail and what your areas of responsibility were?

Ross Guenther: [00:03:38] Yeah. Sure. Thank you. 2015, I was appointed by the then, chief commissioner Graham Ashton as an assistant commissioner with the task of establishing a new counter terrorism command. That came about predominantly because of the risk and threat environment at the time, and it very much changed with the activities of ISIS in Syria and the threat of young people traveling from Australia to that conflict zone and then the potential of them coming back and what it looked like in terms of our own threat environment, of course, in Victoria. So Graham appointed me to establish that, so that was probably one of the most satisfying experiences of my policing career, in fact, forming up a new command which basically operated in tandem with the Australian Federal Police and the other security agencies to really focus on the protection of community in Victoria. So I continued in that role as you pointed out till 2020. And in 2020, I was appointed as a deputy commissioner for public safety and security. That was a much broader role. It actually included being oversight of Canada Tourism Command plus intelligence and covert support command, crime command, public safety, the transit and public safety command as well. So, essentially, all the bits and pieces and specialist areas. So whether it was canine to tactical policing to horses to marine to search and rescue to specialist investigation of serious and organised crime or homicide, they essentially, they all fell under my remit with an assistant commissioner reporting from each area.

Michael Green: [00:05:10] That seems an enormous area. Ross, practically, could you actually get a job done?

Ross Guenther: [00:05:15] Yeah. Look, I think so. Actually, should be more confident. Yeah. I'm very sure we were able to do that. I was fortunate enough to have some excellent assistant commissioners overseeing those areas. We have very good systems and structures in place. You're right in the sense it's it was an incredibly dynamic area because from a Victoria policing point of view, you're dealing with around 4,000 full time employees across those work groups. So it's a big chunk of the workforce that you're taking responsibility for and making decisions around how they're best supported and what sort of technology they have available and what sort of capabilities we need to build along the way.

Michael Green: [00:05:53] In that position, you were dealing on a daily basis, well, a daily basis, but you were dealing regularly, I guess, with the threat of terrorism, which has now become real in the last month or so, particularly with Bondi in the forefront of our minds. Having had that position and and having seen what's developed, are there ways we could do it better, ways we should do it better?

Ross Guenther: [00:06:12] I think there's always ways we could or should do it better. I think one of the one of the challenges in our current environment is there's a lot of there's a diversity of opinion about what's being done and what's not being done. There's a reluctance to call out the threats within the environment because they might appear to be divisive, and they might impact different communities. But I think we've been very low to have honest conversations, particularly in the last, I would say, three to four years. It's often talked about information and misinformation that goes on in within our social networks and social media, but, really, there's been a vacuum of really authoritarian authoritarian voices coming out and actually saying, well, this is the situation we're facing. We need to pull together as a whole, as a community, and take a much more secular approach rather than saying, well, if I say that I'm gonna put one group off or another group off. I think there's real opportunity to to really go forward and seek a much broader commitment from community in general to to fix this. In terms of the investigation and oversight and the activities of intelligence services, etcetera, I think they work they work tremendously hard in in the background, and a lot of what they do can't be shared for a whole range of reasons. And they are very successful, like I say,

even in the ten years that I worked in this space. They're very successful in interrupting and interfering with potential attacks. Unfortunately, those stories can't be celebrated, but nevertheless, they exist. And to suggest that, you know, there's always an oversight factor or someone missed out in hindsight on a piece of information. To be fair, that's always a possibility because I always get drawn into the Rumsfeldian theory, the unknown unknowns. And it's very difficult if you're an intelligence analyst to be conclusive about a piece of information that might translate to an attack, a threat of an attack, or not really anything at all. So I think there's some real challenges there.

Michael Green: [00:08:15] One of the successes, I understand, was a potential attack in Federation Square here in Melbourne. Yes. And that can be spoken about?

Ross Guenther: [00:08:22] Yes. That can be spoken about.

Michael Green: [00:08:23] Could you tell us a bit about it, please, Ross?

Ross Guenther: [00:08:25] Yeah. So in that period of time, we had a group of young men that we felt were committed to, through their ideology, to committing an attack in the city of Melbourne. We're unsure actually when or where that would take place. On a period of time when that group were under surveillance by a tactical group and other services, they met within Federation Square. They had backpacks on. They were discussing a potential attack in that area, surrounded by community. Our tactical groups were very close to the point. They thought that they may have committed an attack on that day. And had they gone to do that, there would likely be a fatal response from our tactical police in that circumstance. Fortunately, they didn't. But what that circumstance did do, it escalated in my front of mind and the people within my command and our joint counterterrorism team, the fact that we were very close to taking overt action rather than sitting back and waiting. So that did translate into making a decision to go forward and arrest. That occurred within the days after that event. Those individuals were prosecuted successfully and are now serving various very long sentences.

Michael Green: [00:09:37] And you knew about this potential terrorist event because some member of the public came forward.

Ross Guenther: [00:09:42] Yep. Yeah. So so often this is how information is received through either through national affiliations or or through just members of the public in doing the right thing in Victoria. They're not sure what they see, but they think potentially this could be it could be an attack, a potential attack. And so, yeah, we receive that sort of information on a very regular basis.

Michael Green: [00:10:04] Getting back to the mention of the Commonwealth, do the various Commonwealth and state organizations work closely enough together in sharing intelligence, in supporting each other? There's no egos getting involved about one wanting to be the the bigger dog in the fight.

Ross Guenther: [00:10:17] No. I don't think I don't think Ego gets in the way. My relationships, both federally and state wise, have always been very strong. I've always found them those affiliations to be very important. So the structure of the the response, if you like, sits very much under the operations of the joint counter terrorism teams. So this example would be where we have Victoria Police detectives embedded with Australian Federal Police detectives in teams working together with a background, obviously, of input from our other intelligence agencies to assist in that. Now when it comes to an arrest phase like like this instance in Federation Square, those teams come together, and in fact, I would be invited down to a meeting where we would be making decisions about going forward and the rest. But that's not made by just Victoria Police. That's made within that national operating environment. I think that as a system has put us in good stead, and as I said, there's lots of times where we've been interject able to interject before an attack's occurred, but we haven't been able to publicize that. The other part of it is there is a framework called the the ANZCTC, the Australian New Zealand Counterterrorism Committee. That is got that has representation from all the states and including, obviously, the relevant federal bodies. That generally does a very good job of bringing us together to discuss these situations and how best to respond, I suppose.

Michael Green: [00:11:43] So overall, you think we're doing maybe as good a job as we can do? And always obviously, there can be improvement, but there are no glaring gaps.

Ross Guenther: [00:11:52] Look. I think every time you look at these and as you would well understand, there will be a in the terms of this commission, it will look at the activities of the ANZCTC and the joint counter terrorism teams, and I think that's a good thing as long as what that does is it translates into a better operating model because both here and overseas, we've seen the operation of hindsight bias where many of these matters would go back into a coronial situation where decisions are unpacked in matters of seconds, whereas considerations of whether to do or not to do or the intelligence basis would be taking place months before all this. Yes. I'm very open to criticism constructive criticism. That's how we move forward as long as it doesn't erode something that you already have that's very successful. And, Ross, what about the balance, which is very, very difficult to achieve between the freedoms we expect living in a democracy, freedom of speech, and as is currently politically sensitive, freedom to own guns against wanting to outlaw hate speech and wanting to limit gun ownership. Have you have you got a

Michael Green: [00:13:01] View on where the line should be drawn about between our freedoms and our security?

Ross Guenther: [00:13:05] Yeah. I think one one of the things we need to be very careful of is the reactive versus the proactive. You know, I thought about this question, and I for me, it's it's like change management. If you wanna initiate change, you gotta pre bring people along with you. What concerns me is if you just respond and react without sufficient explanation as to why we need you to come along with us on this journey, change the legislation, then I fear that you will not get public acceptance of it. I'm not saying it's wrong. I understand the gun laws, the restrictions. I understand that government needs to consider all that. But the back end piece is, well, how are you gonna bring the community along with that so that we don't get more divisiveness over it? We go, well, we have a situation where we have gunners that go, well, I'm not giving up. I'll just hide them. I'll get rid of them. There'll be more COVID the way they they handle their weapons. And the other piece of just gun just legislation alone, it's not gonna deal with all the illegally imported firearms that are already coming into this country that will be you know, serious and organized crime doesn't worry about legislation. So, you know, it deals with that on one level, but, again, I'd go back to if we're responding to Bondi, and I think there's been a vacuum of public leadership around this for several years. To be brutally honest, we should have been talking about

antisemitism probably a number of years ago, not in the back end of an event where we've just seen it, you know, translate, escalate over a number of years without publicly responding and bringing community together. Yes. Certainly. When you speak to Jewish people, they say this is not Bondi is not a one off thing.

Michael Green: [00:14:40] It's been building for quite a while, and we've ignored it.

Ross Guenther: [00:14:43] Yeah.

Michael Green: [00:14:43] Then do you think we've changed as a society? Now you were a policeman for thirty years. Towards the end of, well, towards the end of that time, we've seen policemen murdered at Port Punker and those two up in Queensland, those two policemen, then again, you as a young policeman saw colleagues murdered. Yeah. Has there been a change in our society? Are there more people who want to destabilize our society or who are prepared to murder people they hate? Is there any or is it it's always been us?

Ross Guenther: [00:15:11] I think as an element, it's always been there. I think society necessarily is just so much more complex. If I go back to my own initial policing experience, so it's actually dating me, but I was learning to type on a typewriter at the police academy. We used to get whacked on the back of our hands if we actually looked at the keys. That's certainly not the case would be accepted now, but it shows you the translation from a I would say in the seventies and eighties of simple time, even though we'd lost we'd lost police and they were killed during that period, to now you get the filtration of ideology, you've got serious and organised crime at an escalating rate, at a very, you know, challenging rate with the complexities of technology that exceeds our capability in some respects because it becomes so expensive. Theoretically, is it worse now than it was in the seventies and eighties? I think, yes. I think communities are much more divided now. I'd be very surprised if we went back to community and most people in their streets know know their neighbors, for example. I grew up in Lower Plenty on a on a dirt road and everyone knew everyone who was on that road. I don't think that's the case now. I think people are much more I hasten to say, probably much more selfish now. They follow their own what what they can get out of life, and I think that applies within the within the crime realm as well. Because there's the amount of money that's flushing around now in in serious and organized crime is unbelievable.

Michael Green: [00:16:41] Is that mainly related to drugs and or tobacco?

Ross Guenther: [00:16:44] Drugs. Yeah. Drugs and tobacco, but, you know, we're also seeing, you know, a lot of these high end cars have been stolen and send over shipped overseas. You know, control the drug market, control you control a lot of a lot of funds, billions of dollars worth of serious and organized crime in this country every year. And that has that brings its own threat into our environment with that as well. And we've we've seen that, you know, the the fire bombings of the cafes and shops and, I I guess, the reluctance to even consider people's safety. You know, a lot of a lot of the buildings that are being hit have have residential properties above them, so there's no consideration of the risk to to human life.

Michael Green: [00:17:26] It's not a very pretty picture, Ross. I guess at this stage, we better go back to the beginning. Yeah. Tell us about your upbringing. You you just mentioned Lower Plenty. That's where you grew up on a dirt road.

Ross Guenther: [00:17:36] Yep. I did. So I was lucky enough. Lower Plenty in the nineteen sixties, of course, was it was classified as semi rural, so, you know, I lived in that pretty much grew up in that area area, went to the local primary school and to Otham High School for a couple of years. But it was, you know, as I just pointed out, it was a very simple life. It was, you know, fantastic. Music became very important to me very early on.

Michael Green: [00:18:00] That's the interesting part. After this long conversation you just had now about very serious topics throughout the whole of our society, a lot of your formation came out of music.

Ross Guenther: [00:18:10] Yes.

Michael Green: [00:18:11] Tell us about that.

Ross Guenther: [00:18:12] Yeah. Well, I, yeah, I grew up at a house who always I was surrounded by a lot of music. My mother, before the birth of my brother, who's six years older, was a very good soprano, beautiful singer, very, very accomplished piano player as well, which came in very handy for me later on. And so, you know, I guess, you know, mom was a runner-up in the scenario, I think, about 1948, a finalist in the

scenario. And that that competition at the time was that was the top of the that was the top of the tree. In fact, many of the singers that that were successful in the scenario went on to have very productive careers. She she was a school teacher at the time and chose to have a focus on her family instead, so she she didn't pursue a a career in music. My musical journey then really started with me trying to learn piano from her, and I don't know whether you've ever tried to teach one of your children an instrument. Normally, it doesn't go very well. And as a 10 year old boy, I didn't respond very well. But what I did find out when I had the opportunity to go to Gilbert and Sullivan musical at Eltham High School, HMS Pinafore, I just loved the sound of the clarinet. So I can't remember coming home that night saying, no. That's it. I wanna learn clarinet. That's my commitment. So so that was it for my tenth birthday. They mom and dad bought me a clarinet, and then my journey in in music started there.

Michael Green: [00:19:27] Is your brother a musician as well?

Ross Guenther: [00:19:29] Well, he would say he is, but I would say he loves the guitar. He he plays okay. But he never he didn't pursue that as in any professional sense, but he's always enjoyed playing guitar. So what part did music play in your teenage years and leading up to you making a choice about university? It was everything in my teenage years. So as I said, I started on clarinet, learning off Alan Eaton who ran the powerhouse big band down at Albert Park Lake. It was huge at the time. I moved from Alan to learning from Philip Michelle, who was the principal clarinetist in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra at the time. They used to call him Philip Perfect. He was just an outstanding musician and and a wonderful and exacting teacher. And as I said, I was lucky enough that my mom was a great piano player because she used to do all the accompaniment for me at home when I was preparing to do exams and and the like. That was really helpful. Of course, I was lucky enough to go to Wesley College in my teenage years from year no. I've got I've got third form, which is year nine in the new. So from that time on, I started learning saxophone from a from a wonderful teacher at at Wesley called John Lee, and Philip became a bit concerned because he was a bit worried about my clarinet embouchure. So there was a bit of tension across that period of time, I have to say. But as a 15 year old, can I say, he's a lot sexier playing saxophone than clarinet? Put it that way. Yeah. I was lucky enough. I was very involved in music and the big band at school and picked up the flute

towards the end of that period of time as well. So it was a it was a fantastic time for me, just just more broadly in terms of my music.

Michael Green: [00:21:07] You never thought about doing law at university, but you came up with very good marks in year 12 Yep. And hence, you did apply for and get into

Ross Guenther: [00:21:15] Law at Monash. Yes. Yeah. I was lucky enough to a very good year 12 result, and the back end of that was, yes, I'm I'm enrolled in economics law at Monash University in 1975. And can I say, I was pretty good at the law, but I was not very good at macro and microeconomics and statistics? Because I hadn't done general maths since about for two years, so it did that didn't go that well. But I loved the law and the politics side of it, those two subjects. But I decided to transfer at the end of that year to Melbourne University, which had Melbourne's Teachers College at the time to study music. And I learned from Graham Lyle, who he was a musical director for many years for Channel nine, and then just an excellent and outstanding musician himself, a saxophone player. And Graham pretty much said to me, you need to make a decision whether you're gonna teach or you're gonna be a professional musician, one or the other. So I was going around looking at all the different orchestras. So at that time, there was one at Channel seven, there was one at Channel o doing Young Talent Time. There was the ABC. So as a result of looking at all those different orchestras and watching Graham direct or perform in them, I decided to pursue that career. So I'd left. I was offered the opportunity to play down at permanently down at Restpoint Casino.

Michael Green: [00:22:32] Melbourne australia's first casino? Yep. Down in Hobart?

Ross Guenther: [00:22:36] Yeah. Which was just such an exciting experience because people used to come in from all over the country, and we had some wonderful acts that I had the opportunity to work with. And, yeah, I have to say it was just an exciting time in my life.

Michael Green: [00:22:48] Were you playing all three instruments, or were you playing the flute or the saxophone or the clarinet?

Ross Guenther: [00:22:54] All three. So commercially as a musician, then and now, there would be an expectation that you would play all the reeds and you would play

flute, piccolo, and those other instruments. So, yeah, if you're working back end artist generally, there will be a a book that has all of those requirements.

Michael Green: [00:23:13] And, so, when you would have been 20 Yep. You make a decision, I won't complete a university degree. I'll become a professional musician. Yep. And did so for the next ten years.

Ross Guenther: [00:23:23] Yes. I did. Yeah. On my reading, traveled around Australia a lot. I did. I've yes. I was relatively itinerant, Michael, you might describe me as, but yeah. So I left Rest Point and went to Perth, completed a series called Manteca, which is a, like, a ten, twelve piece fusion band over there for the ABC, which are now being posted in YouTube online, which is quite humorous looking back at me at about 21 with the mustache and long hair. But anyway, that was a wonderful experience. Out of that, I was offered the opportunity. Rest Point established another hotel at Alice Springs. Federal Hotels did, so I put a band into there. I was there for a year. They then asked me to put another band into Launceston Country Club, so I moved back to Tasmania and put a band into there. I moved a year later back to Hobart, and then I was teaching music there. I taught flute, clarinet, and saxophone in the primary and secondary areas and performed at night with different bands. And then I

Michael Green: [00:24:15] You were never a conductor?

Ross Guenther: [00:24:16] No. Not really. The only the only time I really did any conducting would be when we used to do some local things for the local television station there, award nights and things like that.

Michael Green: [00:24:26] Ross, I think you're being far too modest here. So let's drop a few names and tell us who you've played

Ross Guenther: [00:24:32] With or for. Well, the great thing about being at Rest Point was the exposure to international and and national acts. So, yeah, I was lucky enough to work with Shirley Bassey on a number of occasions, both actually down there and back here. Also, Barry White, actually more when I when I came back to Melbourne. The likes of Tina Turner, Manhattan Transfer, for those who could ever remember them, not sure they would perform now. The Ink Spots, we were lucky enough then to also have the stylistics come down there. So it was really a cavalcade of mixtures between

great national acts and great international acts. One story where I did a week week of shows here at the Hilton Hotel with with Barry White, where as you could imagine, generally, the artist wouldn't be there for the rehearsal. Very often, it's the case their musical director will rehearse the band. So we were rehearsing the band. We just top and tailed the show, if you like, so we didn't play through the fullness of every tune. And then we did that first show that night at the Hilton as it was known at the time. And in that show, he did a version of Billy Joel's Just the Way You Are.

Ross Guenther: [00:25:35] And, of course, I thought, well, I know this song backwards, and there was a very long tenor sax solo in the middle of it. As you know, Barry has a way of delivering his product like, he sort of wanders around a bit, and I thought, oh, no. Verse chorus, verse chorus. And, you know, I did have a chart for it, but I thought, I know the song. I'll I'll just come in. So I came in with a solo, but I did note that Barry was still singing. And I thought, well, I can't stop because anytime now Barry's gonna he's gonna stop and I'm due in. So I kept playing. Anyway, his son was the stage manager, one of the backing vocalists, he came up to me at the end. He said, are you the Tenors Sox bars? He did. He said, mister Wise asked tomorrow night if he could please not play when he's singing. So I learned my lesson, and to my chagrin, most of my fellow musicians counted every single bars rest for the rest of the week. I think there was about 299 bars rest and they deliberately annoying me by counting them. So I've I had some wonderful experiences during that time.

Michael Green: [00:26:35] And yet you decide the life of a professional musician after ten years, so that you've given it a fair go Yep. Is not for you. Why did you make the decision, and why did you choose the police force?

Ross Guenther: [00:26:46] Yeah. It's a great question. That the year leading into me joining the job, I was actually doing the Andy Sigley show It was the last of the those type of lifetime things that Channel Nine producing on a large level, and I think it was on a Wednesday night. I was working in that band with guys that had worked in all those Channel Nine orchestras for many years. And those days, you know, you used to get a group certificate for your tax and make your declaration at the end of the year. Well, I'd have 20 or 30 of them. And trying to actually, trying to get a home loan at that stage through banks when you had multiple sources of income was was actually next to impossible. So I thought my brother had been in the job about six years as a as a police

officer, and he said, well, why don't you join the job? You can still you'll still be able to play because it's shift work. So I thought, that's good, stable income, and I'll keep playing. So I submitted my application. I was lucky enough to get in in 1985, and, yeah, the the rest is history, really.

Michael Green: [00:27:43] I'm assuming, and tell me if I'm wrong, Ross, that you still play to this day. Surely as a musician that you've been Yes. You can't stop playing.

Ross Guenther: [00:27:50] No. No. Music's it's a huge part of my life. So, yeah, I still play. I do little things here and there and enjoy listening to an enormous amount of music.

Michael Green: [00:28:03] Now we better get onto the police force, I guess, because it is your life in the law after all. Those ten years with those multiple group certificates, so you're basic you're self employed. Yes. You haven't got a boss. You run your own race. You join a highly disciplined organization. Yep. Was it a culture shock? Did you struggle to start with?

Ross Guenther: [00:28:23] I wouldn't say, actually, yes. I probably would say. It was it was very different because it's very hierarchical. So coming out of an environment which I controlled because it was my environment to an environment which was everyone else controlled because as a very junior constable, you're at the bottom of the tree. And I still remember on graduating from the academy, one one of the things you went straight to do was go to your first training station. So mindless and killed her. Total baptism of fire at the time. I remember having the one meeting I had with the senior sergeant at arrival with four of my recruit colleagues, and we were told, we haven't had trainees here at St Kilda for five years, and we don't like them. So here's a transfer form. If you make one mistake, you'll move. I'll fill the form out on your behalf. That was my introduction. That was the only time I really had anything to do with that senior sergeant for the next three months. So it was you know, to be honest, it was a very different approach to the extent that it makes me think about on one Saturday morning working work in that divisional van, it was only myself and one of my squad mates available. Now that would be very rare. The two recruits would go out and leave the van, but the senior members weren't available that morning. So the sergeant came and gave me 40¢ and said, you're in

charge. If you get out there and you can't work something out, please don't come up on the radio, find a telephone booth.

Michael Green: [00:29:46] But he didn't want you on the telephone on the radio because his superiors would know that two Yeah. Two junior guys are out on their own.

Ross Guenther: [00:29:55] He's put two recruits out by themselves to solve solve all the crime and secured on Saturday morning. Yeah. It's a pretty risky endeavor.

Michael Green: [00:30:02] Was there support for you at at a at an official level, at an organized level? I mean, young guys like that coming out, I'm assuming, knowing nothing. Was there any sort of backup or structure to help you?

Ross Guenther: [00:30:11] Yeah. You're right. You pretty much knew well, you didn't know nothing, but the thing is your your studies predominantly are around the law and the application of the law and how you would approach charging someone and take him through the digital process versus you really learn to apply that skill when you're in the workplace. You don't know what that's gonna look like. You don't know the dynamics because working in even doing death notifications to to family members that have lost a loved one, Nothing really prepares for that even though you know that's a dynamic part of your role. So, yeah, the learning curve started right there. That's for sure.

Michael Green: [00:30:46] But what did you get support? Were there people who were, I don't know, senior constable sergeants, etcetera, who were aware of the difficulty or remembered being juniors themselves Yep.

Ross Guenther: [00:30:58] And therefore supported you? Yeah. And I I think that's always been the case at police stations. In my case, I had a number of sergeants there were that were fantastic mentors. One, Graham Nynagale at the time, he springs to mind because he was always known for working the it was like a 6PM shift on a Friday night, which is like the first twilight shift you'd take a recruit out because you'd always get a brief of evidence. If you're working as a guilder on a Friday night then in those years, you were gonna come across a crime, definitely. So, yeah, it was more the support with the networks within the job, I suppose, that brother and sister nature of the policing as a community because much of which you see, you can't relate to other

people and nor should you because you some of it's quite traumatizing. So, yeah, I would say they're informal supports, not formal supports, not at that point in time.

Michael Green: [00:31:48] Now there are formal supports?

Ross Guenther: [00:31:50] Yeah. I think support networks are a lot more mature. The capabilities around them, what's available through the various welfare areas is significant now.

Michael Green: [00:31:59] Did you enjoy coming out, being a probationary constable, then being a constable? Did you enjoy the work? Did you enjoy being in the divvy van, doing traffic work, going to the MCG, and standing around the ground, etcetera?

Ross Guenther: [00:32:12] I loved the work because it was I I don't know. It's no one day is ever the same. As I said, you know, in that junior phase where you go from being knowing nothing to start to apply your skills to work within the courts. One of the things particularly in my later phase before I went to Peran at being at Russell Street is we had the great experience of giving evidence for everything. That doesn't happen anymore because of the the size of the system. So there was no we were required to give evidence. If we charge a person with drunk and put them in custody, we would be back in court the next day providing that evidence, and they'd be called and discharged. But what they did is that matured your whole understanding of the the judicial structures and the way you operate within that structure. I loved working at Russell Street, except when they found out I'd transfer I was transferring to Perran. They put they put me on Parliament House for a night shift for the last week in the middle of winter, which was not fun standing outside Parliament House in winter, I can tell you.

Michael Green: [00:33:10] And what? They weren't happy with you leaving Russell Street to go to Prahran?

Ross Guenther: [00:33:13] No. And even if you did I mean, it does really date me, but even if you did an afternoon shift at Parliament House at that time, part of your role was to go across our forensic science area. It was actually in Spring Street. Part of your job was to go over there an afternoon shift and release the public servant telephoneist and who had the old push pull phones there. So, inevitably, you're cutting people off that are

making calls, and there was no that actual that phone and that instrument is actually out of forensic science lab out of McLeod. So we did get to do some quite diverse roles.

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Michael Green: [00:34:16] So moving up the ladder, have to sit various exams. You go in and out of uniform?

Ross Guenther: [00:34:20] Yes. Say for the first five years, pretty much in uniform, four years, by which time I'm at Peran by this stage. I'm keen to become a detective. We had at that stage they get rebranded as different names, but essentially, they're the same as they still exist, the district support group. So that was plainclothes, mainly investigating drug trafficking in the area and burglaries and the and the like assisting the CI at the time, and exams along the way, senior constables and then obviously sergeants, which I did, but I was already a detective by the time.

Michael Green: [00:34:51] Can I just stop there with the sergeants? I had the feeling in preparing for this, Ross, that sergeants and senior sergeants, notwithstanding that guy that's been killed when you first started, might be the linchpin of the whole of the police force. Are they? And are they as important as it appeared to me in reading about your career? They're absolutely everything.

Ross Guenther: [00:35:09] So they're your first tier of really critical leadership, particularly the sergeants because, essentially, they're they're not even really one step away from your operational component. If you look at they're actually deploying with your constables and your senior constables. So they've they're oversiding people that know pretty much zero from a policing point of view to that have been in the job quite a few years. So their role is essential. It's probably as much around the mentoring as it is around active oversight of the policing function itself. So and, again, the senior sergeant, not that far removed, but not out not out with the troops, if you like, as much. So but both of those roles, so influential. And from a leadership point of view and building capability, they really are the areas that you need to focus on.

Michael Green: [00:35:55] And whereabouts were you a sergeant and then a senior sergeant?

Ross Guenther: [00:35:58] So as a sergeant, I was primarily down at St I didn't ever move very far between Piranha and St Kilda. So I noticed that. Yes. I I I just love working in that area and the communities that that live there. So sergeant at St Kilda, three years then senior sergeant back in charge at Peran.

Michael Green: [00:36:17] And throughout this time, maybe the whole time or at least part of the time you're studying?

Ross Guenther: [00:36:21] Yeah. I'm studying. So Externally,

Michael Green: [00:36:23] Not just within the police force, but external study.

Ross Guenther: [00:36:25] Yeah. So one of the things the influence of my family was the the love of learning. So I always loved to learn and find things that were innovative and try things that were different in terms of approaches. So, yeah, across this period of time, I did a number of qualifications. I I did some took some stuff in relation to project management to leadership to to master's later later on across that period of time as well.

Michael Green: [00:36:53] And are they necessary to progress in the job?

Ross Guenther: [00:36:56] I don't think they are necessary, but one thing, particularly when I did my master's in criminology was it's actually just learning how to think. I, you know, I think Melbourne University have always had that very much as a focus of their learning environment that first year for students when they move from into higher education and spending a year learning how to think. It's learning how to question, how to hypothesize and actually test hypotheses. That to me, I found, that really assisted my police career.

Michael Green: [00:37:24] It seems to me, Ross, that some interesting questions arose out of your time of doing your masters at Bond. You talk about things like what are the drivers and motivators for crime? I think that was addressed in the criminology degree. Yep. If I pull a lever here, what is the result? Does it reduce crime or just move it? I find

that very interesting. I mean, can we ever reduce crime or do we just move it from one spot to another? Were these things answered in bond? Were they just questions that are asked to something for people to think about and to try to deal with and cope with in their policing life?

Ross Guenther: [00:37:57] No. It's interesting. I mean, part part of my my thesis, actually, to complete my studies there was actually looking at exactly that how to if you you pull a lever, say, to respond and reduce to residential burglary, you take a number of different approaches to do that in a practical sense, which which we did. What's what's the likely outcome of that? And that was really interesting because in the in the period where we myself and my the team that I led at Perran used that approach, we reduced residential burglary in that year by about 26%. It was enormous. What was interesting, though, was there was some displacement from Stonnington from the other side of Stonnington up towards Malvern, so at the same period of time, their residential burglaries started to go up. The other part was our level of theft from shops went up extraordinarily. Now what we were finding then, and you only really find this out when you mask actually offenders when you're in interviewing. Well, you know they've got a background in doing burglaries, but now they're doing a lot of thefts from shops. And they're saying, well, we we need to do a lot more of those to actually get the same money because it's money to buy drugs.

Ross Guenther: [00:39:05] We need to do more of the shoplifting, if you like, to get the same amount of money we get from pawning stuff that we stole from someone's house, if you like. So at a simplistic level, it sounds, you know, it sounds like it's it's it doesn't function well, but actually it worked it worked really well. It gave us a lot of understanding around it from a practical point of view, and what it made me understand is that you use those academic affiliations and to think about how you could address a problem and actually test that in in real time and work together in addressing the problem. And we we used to do that even things with councils, for example. You know, council were very good working with me when I was there, when we'd find areas, pedestrian streets that were very poorly lit. They they put some much better lighting into that street, make them much more safe. Simple thing, not a hard thing to do, but a really effective thing about drawing addressing community safety.

Michael Green: [00:39:58] And this came out of the criminology masters you did at Bond?

Ross Guenther: [00:40:02] Yes. Yes. Because what it did, it it just made me think about it a lot in a much more deeper sense rather than just in a a practical you know, I talked at the start of our interview in terms of the reactive versus the proactive, we can always take a a response to something. We can instantly say, okay. Well, let's do that. But what about what about if we think it in a different way and we be more proactive about it, more thorough in our thinking about it?

Michael Green: [00:40:26] In the modern police force, are more police officers doing studying to that extent? I mean, a master's degree? Yes.

Ross Guenther: [00:40:33] I think my own reflection would be we've got a very, very well educated police service here in Victoria. I'm lucky enough to represent the chief commissioner on a number of the graduations where I'd actually present them with their Freddie and their certificate essentially, and going through the background of these individuals always used to give me great, great hope.

Michael Green: [00:40:58] I mentioned earlier, and I haven't got to yet, but it might take us back a bit, but I think we do need to mention that as a young policeman, you saw four colleagues who are friends of yours as well as colleagues murdered, young policemen.

Ross Guenther: [00:41:12] Yes.

Michael Green: [00:41:13] Did this just have a big effect upon you? I mean, did it make you question, do I wanna stay in the job?

Ross Guenther: [00:41:19] It never made me question about staying in the job, but, yes, it's for the entire of my policing, it's always been a cause for reflection. So these instances, like, don't go to work thinking that two of the people you work with are not gonna come home that night, and I think that's a very different it takes a very different thought process to actually work through that. So when Steve Tyner and Damien Eyre were killed in Wall Street, I was staying at the station that night. I was woken by the sergeant and said, you you need to put your uniform on because this this is a situation

that's occurred. And I reflect on that one in particular because Steve Tyner had been involved in disrupting an armed robbery in South Yarra the previous week where he'd been involved in shooting one of the offenders, and he was advised not to go on to the night shift where he died on Wall Street by the police psychologist, I think, at the time. And he said, no. I want the six days off, which is not unusual. Cops love their six days off after all their time off after night shift. He probably had plans. And a number of us said, well, we'll we'll do the night shift for you. No. He goes, no. No. No problem. So and then that instance occurred. And then a few years after that, of course, there was the killing of the two police officers down at Rabbit at Gary Silk and Rod Miller. Now Gary, worked with at the district support group, and Rod came up on assignment as an acting detective when I was a detective at Peran. So that time, I'd probably been in the job about twenty years, so four of my colleagues have been killed in just doing their job. So it's not something you think will ever happen, and fate just takes a takes a role, I suppose, in determining how that will happen. But, yeah, enormously sad, terribly sad, and the recent police deaths at Porpunkah, enormously sad. I'm assuming with the police deaths

Michael Green: [00:43:07] At Porpunkah, there's a lot more counseling and support offered to members of the force than there maybe was back when the two murders or four murders took place that you were personally connected to. Yeah. Absolutely. It's the professional networks, the

Ross Guenther: [00:43:24] Professional support that's provided both within Victoria Police and also through the police association, the union itself, they're a very mature level. They're ongoing. There's huge commitments around that. In the background, you've got police legacy supporting if there's families that are being left isolated by it as well. So, yeah, I think it's a very different place. Yeah. I have to say in the eighties, our way of dealing with crisis was pretty much going to the pub. Yeah. That was the thing, which the police psychologist actually at the time said, not necessarily a bad thing, but then you've got to combine that with a professional counseling, which really it was a very immature model at the time.

Michael Green: [00:44:00] Now it's very different. Ross, would I be right in assuming that when a policeman is killed on the job, his colleagues and peers may have a desire for revenge even, and therefore to be a very difficult role for the senior policeman to

play in managing them, in managing the whole of the force maybe when there's been something like poor bunker.

Ross Guenther: [00:44:20] Yeah. It's very much the case that it's a really complex environment for workplace managers after the death of police colleagues, enormously complex, because there will be a huge mixture of emotion that will be anything from if I come across the offender, I will take fatal if I'm given the opportunity, I'll take fatal action. Or I don't know. I don't know. I'll be fearful. I don't know how I respond. So it creates an enormous amount of emotion and doubt in the workforce. Part of that of your job as a leader is really give comfort to those responding that they need to remain professional. And if they can't and if they're fearful of that, then you literally you've got to take them out of that environment. Interesting. If I reflect back on to Steve Tone and Damien Eyre for the days after that event, myself, my colleagues, we didn't work the different shifts at Peran. Secura came up and actually covered us during that period, and I think I came on to the night shift the following week after that. But even that, the emotions are still very high there. We had a situation where our local McCarthys were leaving Halton Commodores, stolen Halton Commodores with their doors open in middle of intersections, you can imagine the level of emotion in approaching that. So for the sergeants, so I make sure that two or three vehicles approaching those at every one time. So, I mean, that's a that's a very minor example of the escalation in emotion, I guess. But if you look at this dimension, the size of something like poor Punker, where you've got tactical, you've got intelligence specialists, you've got on the ground foot constables. You've got specialist search and rescue. You've enormous workforce and a lot of complexity into managing that and keeping on a highly professional level. As an outsider from what I saw, it was incredibly well managed in a very, very difficult situation. Very difficult indeed. You had

Michael Green: [00:46:11] A time at a leadership center in South Yarra Yes. Which we've heard of before from an earlier guest who was one of your colleagues, Emmett Dunn, and it intrigues me.

Ross Guenther: [00:46:21] It seems to be a a very high quality leadership course that the Victoria Police runs from that center out in South Yarra. Yes. The Early Leadership Development Center has it's got a long history with learning and educating police. It was responsible for many years, certainly for many years as the inspector program that was

delivered there for people that want to become inspectors. It was a residential program, and later on when I was promoted there as the inspector, our responsibility was to develop leadership programs for our local government areas. So really our inspectors, senior sergeants, and teams working in right across this state, which is which was an initiative actually of Christine Nixon as the as the chief commissioner at the time, and we we developed a program called targets, which was really inherently based on challenging leadership across the each of the local government areas and trying to encourage teams to work much more effectively together. So I think at the time we delivered that program within a year to 46 local government areas. It was a three day program. It was enormously successful in really getting teams working anywhere from a metropolitan location to Wangaratta to Mildura. During that period, we trained a number of facilitators within our organization. We brought a consultancy in to train the facilitators, and that's actually stood me in really good stead, a great skill learning how to facilitate and how to coach is very much part of what we did during those years.

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Michael Green: [00:48:16] Ross, we've heard about your being at the top ladder of the Victoria Police, being a deputy commissioner, but there's one step or maybe two steps before that, being a superintendent and some other sort of superintendent. Just fill us in on how that how you got to those positions.

Ross Guenther: [00:48:34] Yes. Well, prior to being a superintendent, as I talked about, I'd been an inspector at Airlie. I'd then gone out to the police academy in charge of our detective training school area. I always had a passion for learning, so that was a great fit. I really enjoyed that. But of course, was I was keen to get promoted to superintendent. I was applying for positions, the feedback was you really need to go to a local government area again. Frontline policing first, and then you'd be considered more suitable.

Michael Green: [00:49:01] Can I just clarify? That means don't be at headquarters, which used to be Russell Street and now over here in Spence Street or somewhere.

Don't be there. Be out on the ground in a at Moorabbin, at Broadmeadows, at Sunshine, wherever. Operational.

Ross Guenther: [00:49:16] Yeah. So, yeah, I took that on board, and I had the opportunity to to move to Durbin, which I did as an inspector. And while I was at Durbin, I was pursuing, you know, the the promotional things. I I made application for a superintendent role, on this particular occasion, I was investigating a white power incident at Parliament House because we used to have a revolving roster of one fifties, if you like, that was our call sign. But as the inspector had a white powder incident at at Parliament House, I had to go in and have a look at that while I was actually deciding what was occurring with that. Ken Lay's staff officer rang me and said, can you speak to speak to Ken? I said, sorry, mate. I'm tied up by the white power incident at Parliament House. Can you give me a callback? He goes, I think you'll actually wanna talk to him. It could be in your interest without telling you what it's about. I said, alright. I'll give him a callback. Okay? So, anyway, naively, I went and did my job that morning, and then I rang back, and and Ken advised me that he had appointed me to sue as the superintendent in charge of tactical sport area and as it was tactical areas, can't think of whatever, oh, the cert, sorry. Yeah, of course. Basically public security, essentially. So I did that role for three years and then the opportunity again because I was keen on becoming I thought I had the skill set to become an assistant commissioner. I took the opportunity to transfer down to Moorabbin as the divisional superintendent, which put me back out on the front line, if you like. Not that the tactical side is not the front line, but it's different in charge of general policing areas. So yeah. So I went went to Moorabbin then and pursued my interest in becoming an assistant commissioner.

Michael Green: [00:50:52] It interests me when you went to Moorabbin, you said you Moorabbin Airport was under your Yep. Supervision. It seems to me lots of jobs that you were doing, you as a as a policeman, were not specifically police work. It seemed to me the police are the last safety net where things sort of drop off the edge of other things and they just wind up in the lap of the police. So is I mean, that's beyond Moorabbin. I just it made me wonder, why is that? Why are

Ross Guenther: [00:51:15] The police doing this work that's not policing work? Shouldn't that be someone else's job? Yeah. You summarized that really well. Actually, yeah, we yeah. The policing is called the agency of last response, and there's a reason

for that because policing is there twenty four hours a day and is always available. So, yeah, it does pick up a lot of roles that not necessarily would fall to them. I mean, I think the complexities of the policing role, I think there's an assumption that policing is all about dealing with people that are assaulting or robbing offenders that are committing criminal behaviors, but it's much, much more complex than that. It's meeting with community that you're overseeing. If you're a superintendent in down at Barabbin, then you've got a number of local government areas. You've got community interest within those government areas. You've to meet with those people. Let them express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with police services and understanding the environment. A lot of that is yeah. A lot of it's outside just what we would think is a core or a myth for policing. Dealing with mental health, for example, is an enormous challenge to police. Now we would rightfully think, well, surely that's a health response. It's got to be a health response. But then if the health response is not available, where does it fall? And that's when you get things like divisional vans ramping at hospitals with people that really need treatment that should not be in a police vehicle. They should have arrived in an ambulance and been admitted quickly. Unfortunately, complexity of our environment really and funding issues have probably made that a real struggle over a long time.

Michael Green: [00:52:42] Two more questions I've got for you, Ross. One is how your career as a policeman finished. But maybe before I get to that, over the thirty years starting in the academy, finishing as a deputy commissioner with many stops along the way, did you have a favorite job or jobs?

Ross Guenther: [00:52:58] Actually, I think back and I think I pretty much loved most places I ever worked and enjoyed the time that I had while I was there. In terms of personal professional satisfaction, there was no doubt establishing the counter terrorism command was a highlight of my career. Because I literally started off with myself and my yeah. With the two with two people, and it ended up building a team of about roughly around a 160 odd of very specialist people that did a fantastic job at protecting the Victorian community. A lot of that was unseen, and, you know, that that's the thing for me in terms of recognition. It's it's great as a leader and being involved in the media. You get to respond, but all these people are in the background doing they're really doing all the hard work. They're doing the day to day stuff that really that really, really matters.

And I think if I go back, it's actually making sure you recognize those people along the way. That's the big challenge. That's what good leaders have to do.

Michael Green: [00:53:57] So that was your favorite job? Yep. You finished as a serving policeman last year?

Ross Guenther: [00:54:02] Yeah. Officially retired last year, but, essentially, last day in the job was late twenty four. And what led to that? Look. Probably, was in my fortieth year of policing. I was disappointed with, I guess, with the state of crime in in this state. I didn't feel like I was able to influence in the way I had been previously in relation to how government respond to that. I was quite outspoken in saying that I thought there was a real need for all of the agencies responsible for addressing responding to crime or offending in this state really needed to come together and work out a much more integrated approach to dealing with crime. Because I felt at the time, and I still do, that it's all about reactive. So if community concern is about the number of nighttime burglaries that occur, then there'll be a a response in relation to the number of nighttime burglaries. There might be a bail response, for example, which we've we've had lots of discussions around bail. But then how does that go into the other agencies that have the rehabilitative component? Like, Department of Justice has a number of rehabilitation programs. The other people, the health agencies, education, how do they all plug in so there's some synergy between all of them? And I still I don't see that, and I don't see they've had the opportunity to come together, and I felt in the absence of that that the way this state was heading, that wouldn't change, and I still remain probably the same view. Interestingly, when I did make those comments in an article, I had many people email me saying, oh, we agree. It's a great idea. I had people within the judiciary saying, yes. We absolutely need to do that. People within health were saying we need to do it.

Michael Green: [00:55:46] And you were calling for some sort of a summit meeting between all of the players Yep. The various government departments and Vic Police, etcetera?

Ross Guenther: [00:55:53] Yeah. I essentially said, yeah. Let's leave our egos at the door. Let let's come in and let's say what is the problem we're trying to solve, And let's work together and actually doing it, forgetting take our agency hats off. And I still think that's missing even to the extent that if we create law without hypothesizing and testing,

what what do you want to actually achieve out of it? Like, if you if you bring in new legislation, it is something new, why wouldn't you put KPIs around that and say, well, we're gonna have a look at this in six months and see if that's delivering what it's supposed to. And if it's not, we need to change it. I get a sense we just keep responding, reacting. We're not proactive. We need to be thinking, what do you want Victoria to look like in five years' time? Unless we get everyone together and in the room, the people at all have a significant leadership role in the response, I just don't see that changing, and that's what if you if you ask me what keeps me awake at night, that keeps me awake at night.

Michael Green: [00:56:51] Ross, I would have thought everything you've said is unarguable and sensible and should be done, and yet it led to you finishing up as a police officer.

Ross Guenther: [00:57:01] Yes. Yeah. Well, I was very confident that my approach was more than reasonable, but government didn't see that at the time, and I was asked through different parties as to why why I shouldn't be sacked, why I shouldn't actually finish up my contract immediately as a result of request from from senior officials within government. So it was a very challenging time. And if you can imagine sitting across a table being asked that question going, hang on a minute. I'm not being critical of government. I'm saying there's an opportunity here to actually make things better. And I think it was taken very much as a criticism. And as I pointed out when I've been asked about it, I actually wasn't criticizing government. I was saying there's an opportunity here. We need to take hold of it. And if we don't take hold of it, things will get worse. So I didn't enjoy that support, and I think if you if you don't have that relationship with senior government officials, if you don't feel if they don't have confidence in you, well, then it makes you you did end the water for achieving your job. So I thought, well, I've got lots of life to live, lots of other things to do, and other things to give. And so I I I made the decision to live.

Michael Green: [00:58:12] And so you attended your resignation. Yep. And that leads to the final question.

Ross Guenther: [00:58:16] What are you doing now? You're too young to be not doing anything. Well, you make a good point, Michael. I feel very young and it so yeah. Look.

I've made the decision. Obviously, I still felt I had a lot to give with my experience and my intellect, so I've established my own consultancy business. Clearly, I'm I'm not proposing to work five days a week anymore, but I've been able to the consultancy is very much built around public safety and and security because I have expertise in that area. So, yeah, I've been working with other federal departments and other private sector areas to, I suppose, facilitate maturity in their in their program. So I I write specialist exercises and deliver those and test people's thinking around preparedness, if you like, and resilience.

Michael Green: [00:59:02] Really worthwhile stuff to do, Ross. Thank you for coming in this morning. It's been absolutely fascinating to listen to your life in the law and your life in music, and my people in the decision making areas listen carefully to what you've got to say because it all makes sense to me.

Ross Guenther: [00:59:19] Thanks so much for the opportunity. Great to chat.