

I first got stopped by an officer from the small-town police department about a month after moving to Texas. My new neighbors in Fort Worth had warned me about a strip of roadway across the street in the neighboring city of Watauga. That strip contained Watauga's police headquarters, City Hall, the biggest Baptist church in town and a drive-through McDonald's. A speed trap, they said. I remembered that fact a little too late after I forgot to brake coming down a hill and saw flashing police lights in my rearview mirror. When asked, I told the officer I was new in town, learning my way. He let me go with a warning.

The second time I got summoned by the city came a few weeks later when the town's "honorary police chief" demanded that I come see him in his office. He was the Watauga city manager and former police chief, and the honorary title allowed him to keep his gun. I knew why he wanted me.

In my new job as a metro columnist for the

Fort Worth Star-Telegram, I had written my first column about Watauga City Hall. Maybe he liked it. I drove less than a mile from my new house to his City Hall office situated on that strip. Inside, dark-eyed Bill Keating ordered me to sit, then slammed a copy of my newspaper on his desk.

“Don’t you dare write another word about Watauga, Texas, without talking with me first! You got that, son?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’m serious, son.”

“Yes, sir.”

The third time I got stopped, a police officer pulled me over and asked to see my driver’s license. When he saw my name, he surprised me by introducing himself and shaking my hand. He thanked me for supporting him in a battle with his superiors. Lucky me. I had written a column arguing that after a gallant act he had performed sheltering a young abused girl, he was treated unfairly and punished. After the public learned of his story, they rallied behind him. Before this traffic stop, he and I had never met. We talked by the side of the road. Again—no ticket.

The fourth time came several years later, after writing many more columns about the town’s police and fire departments and city government. By then, I was known among the officers for my writings. Some liked me; others didn’t. Once again, though, I got lucky. The officer who stopped me for speeding let me go with a warning. Later, though, he was scolded by the chief, who heard about it on

the police radio. The officer told me later that his chief chewed him out because he wanted to make sure the officer understood the department’s informal rule:

“You never let Dave Lieber go with only a warning.”

Then there was that fifth time. The stop that has made all the difference.

Here’s what I remember:

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My son Austin, 11, and I are eating breakfast inside that McDonald’s on the strip. He’s my boy, my pride, so much like me. Attentive. Creative. A fast car in the fast lane. I try to get Austin to slow down, but he moves faster than anyone I know. On the basketball court or running down the stairs at home. He can’t stand waiting. He has to keep moving.

On this day, though, things don’t go well for either of us. Austin finishes his pancakes. He wants to go. I’m not done. I start sipping a hot coffee and read the newspaper. This drives him batty. He wants to go home and call a friend so they can play.

“Sit and wait until I’m done, please! I want to finish my coffee.”

“Let’s go, Dad! I want to go now!”

“I’m telling you: sit and wait until I’m done.”

“No, let’s go.” He says it louder. “I want to leave now!”

“Shut up! We’re in a restaurant. Go sit and wait

for me at that table. If you don't, I'm going to let you walk home. You can think about the way you behaved during your walk."

Several men are sitting at nearby tables by themselves. All have their backs to us. But we are loud enough that they can hear.

Next thing I know, I'm fast-walking out the door. Austin is right behind me. I speed up. He speeds up. Outside in the parking lot, I unlock the car, jump in and then lock the doors before he can get in.

I turn on the engine and back the car out. He's still pulling on the handle. When he sees the car moving backward, he lets go but chases me for several steps. Then he stops.

He's standing in the parking lot, crying and bewildered.

I drive away.

Later I learned that several adults gathered around him. One asked Austin if they should call the police. Austin, then 5-foot-3 and capable of walking the 7/10th of a mile, or six blocks, through our neighborhood back to our house, shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't sure what to do.

I drive up the road to cool down. I call my wife, Karen, at work and tell her what happened. She tells me to turn around and get him. I make a U-turn.

Ten minutes or more have passed. If he's not at McDonald's, I'll cruise the route he would take and make sure he's headed home. But in front of

McDonald's, as I pull in, I see a small crowd. Several men turn and glare at me.

I see two Watauga police cars. The officers are waiting for me.

So that's the fifth time I got stopped by Watauga authorities. The one that in the days ahead would make it possible for me to lose so much: my son, my career of 30 years, my job, my good name.

Take your worst 10 minutes of any day. You acted terribly, but maybe nobody knew. Or at least you thought so. Then imagine that everyone finds out. Everyone.

Within days, your foolishness flashes around the world. What you did is featured on the TV news, in newspapers, on radio talk shows and overheated cable-television debates, and in blogs. Everybody has an opinion about you and what you did in those 10 minutes.

Everybody decides whether you are a good dad or a bad dad.

One of the officers greets me by name.

"You're Dave Lieber, right?"

He asks to see my driver's license. He tells me that terrible things could have happened to my son while I was gone. He tells me to stand by myself and wait by the front of McDonald's.

I stand there, like a rock. Eventually, an officer introduces himself by name, but he says it so fast I can't make it out.

"Here's what's going to happen. We're going

to do a report for today's occurrence, OK? We've gathered witness statements from all the witnesses here. We are not going to take any action today with you, which we could. We are going to refer this case to Child Protective Services. We are going to turn it over to our investigation division, and they will give a referral to the district attorney's office. I don't know what the outcome of that will be. That's beyond my area.

"But I just wanted you to be aware of the severity of the circumstances today—I'm sure you probably already are aware of that—and the actions that could take place. We are not going to do that, though, today. And we will leave it up to the process down the road to see what happens. But just keep in mind and be aware that there could be a later date that you will have to answer to a higher cause than us, OK?"

"Yes, sir."

"So keep that in mind. Is there going to be a problem between you and your son now?"

"No."

Another officer approaches.

"Obviously, having had to stand here and think of it, you understand everything that could go wrong, and what our responsibilities are as parents?"

"I do. Thank you."

He says we can go home.

We are in the car, driving home.

"Sorry, Daddy."

Those are the first words out of Austin's mouth. I am relieved to hear them.

"Well, there could be some serious stuff coming out of this," I say. "This will go everywhere."

He tells me that after I left him and the men gathered around, he said he told them: "It was my fault. I was just being mean."

One of the men responded, "No, it doesn't matter what you did. Your dad should never drive off like that."

He also tells me that when the officers found out who his father is, they called in "a higher officer."

Driving us home, I look down and see I'm still holding the cup of coffee I bought at the restaurant. The coffee is cold now.

That's what I remember.

At home.

First, I tend to my son. We talk about what happened. He asks me to apologize, too. Sounds like a good idea. I don't hesitate. We talk about his behavior. We talk about mine, too.

Karen rushes home from work. We are surprised to see her. She quickly scolds: "I don't know what the heck you two were thinking."

The incident is about an hour old when I call my longtime editor, Lois Norder, the managing editor for news and investigations.

"Hey, this is in the category of you better hear it from me first."

The boss listens. Then she says she must hang up and tell the executive editor. A few hours later, Norder calls back and suggests that I write a column about what happened and what I have learned. She tells me to call parenting experts and find out what to do in that kind of situation.

It isn't an outlandish request. Two times a week,

I write "The Watchdog" column. I expose wrongdoing by businesses, governments and others. I write about people's mistakes, and how to fix them. Sometimes, I write about my own mistakes.

A column would be the way to get the story out on my terms. No matter what happens, people can understand that I didn't mean to be a bad dad. Most important, they'd see that I have learned something. And maybe the column will help others. That's what I do for a living.

Writing about my family is not out of the ordinary. Actually, for me, it's the norm. Before I became The Watchdog, I wrote a metro column that alternated hard-hitting investigative stories about the goings-on in 21 cities and six school districts with soft tear-jerker family stories. I thought if readers knew my family and saw similarities with their own lives, they'd be more inclined to pay attention when I turned serious in my writings. And for a dozen years, at least until this moment, it had worked.

I had even proposed marriage to Karen and her two children, Jonathan, 10, and Desiree, 12, in the newspaper in 1994. ("Here in Texas, I've met the woman of my dreams. Unfortunately, she lives with the dog of my nightmares," it began.) The marriage proposal column won first



The woman of my dreams, Karen (left), and her children, Desiree and Jonathan, after I proposed in my newspaper column.

place in the 1995 National Society of Newspaper Columnists contest. I had a new wife with two adorable children that I loved as my own. I had plenty to write about.

Austin's arrival in 1997 was, aside from my wedding, the most joyous day of my life. I couldn't wait to write about him. I didn't even wait for his birth. I announced I'd be a dad by writing an open letter to the as-yet-unborn baby. It ran as my Sunday column.

My darling little Beaver Cleaver Lieber,

I haven't told the world about you yet because your pending arrival is just starting to sink in. Your existence hit me full force last week when your mother and I visited the obstetrician's office. We looked at a sonogram screen showing an image of you inside of her. My goodness, you look about the size of my finger.

"That's the fetus," the doctor said. "See the little flicker?"

I saw your little heart thumping away. I saw your little head and arms, your emerging eye sockets and tiny nose. Kid, you are the most incredible thing I have ever seen.

Since we don't have a name for you, I'm going with the working title of Beaver Cleaver Lieber after one of my favorite television characters. Beaver's father, Ward, always took a genuine interest in his son's activities and escapades. And that's the way I view fatherhood, too.

Last week, in your honor, I placed an old photograph of Ward and little Beaver on our

fireplace mantle. In the photograph, Ward looks sternly at Beaver because, inevitably, the Beav has stumbled into trouble again.

Little one, I was always hesitant to have a child of my own because of my late mother's great prophesy. As a child, whenever I misbehaved, my mother warned, "God is going to punish you when you have children."

Now I have two stepchildren, and they are so wonderful and even-tempered that, obviously, they do not share my genetic material.

But you, little Beav, you have the power to make my mother's words come true. So this is my first official request as your daddy. Please be calm. My mother didn't have to be right about everything.

Your half sister, Desiree, and half brother, Jonathan, eagerly await your arrival next spring. But we won't ever use that "half" word again, because there will be nothing halfway about their love for you.

Your sister is a 14-year-old high school freshman. She's very tall and wants to be a model. Further proof that she does not carry my genetic material.

Your brother is a 12-year-old Little League all-star. He definitely expects you to pitch by the 1998 season.

Both are trying to come up with your name: Jonathan likes Scooter; Desiree favors Alessandra.

"It can't be a run-of-the-mill name," your mother says.

Until we decide, I'll call you Beav.