

Nisleit signs off as San Diego's top cop

'A guardian of the people' who led the Police Department through historic upheaval is saying farewell after 36 years



San Diego Police Chief David Nisleit's last day is Thursday. He started with the department in 1988, when he was just 22, and has risen through the ranks. Alejandro Tamayo / U-T

BY LYND SAY WINKLEY

At 4:30 a.m., San Diego Police Chief David Nisleit is reading police logs.

It's how he starts his day. He pores over every incident from every command. And when he spots an officer who did good work, he sends an email.

“They’re just one liners, ‘Hey, love the proactive police work. Thank you,’” Nisleit said in a recent interview. “It’s simple and allows me to stay in touch with all the great police work that’s being done in the city.”

For those who know the 59-year-old chief best, it’s an unsurprising ritual.

The 36-year veteran retires this week after more than six years as the city’s top cop. It would not be an exaggeration to call his tenure historic, marked by a global pandemic and worldwide protests in the wake of George Floyd’s murder.

“What really stands out to me about Chief Nisleit is he remained, throughout his time, a guardian of the people,” said District Attorney Summer Stephan, one of Nisleit’s longtime colleagues and friends. “He never lost sight of the harm that violence and crime causes, and he cared deeply. He cared for his people, and he cared for his community.”

At 6 feet, 3 inches tall, Nisleit can cut an imposing figure — but he’s quick with a greeting, and has an easy, well-worn smile. He’s an impassioned leader, in both his praise and his disapproval.

The lifelong San Diego resident grew up in the Rolando community and started with the department in 1988. He was 22 years old. Like his dad who retired as a San Diego police captain after 35 years, Nisleit climbed the ranks.

There aren’t many assignments he hasn’t done, from working the front counter at downtown headquarters to captain of the robbery, gang and homicide units to the assistant chief who oversaw all nine patrol divisions.

Nisleit was a cop’s cop who truly enjoyed the work. When he worked a beat, he liked “making arrests, removing people who are causing harm,” he said.

Some of those arrests have stayed with him.

On weekends, the chief often takes early-morning runs along the beach. His route regularly takes him past San Fernando Place in Mission Beach. “There’s not a time I run by there that I don’t think of that case.”

In 2006, three men trolling the Belmont Park area, looking to commit robberies, entered a condo through an unlocked door, officials said. Two young couples, all University of San Diego students, were inside.

The men proceeded to repeatedly rape the two 18-year-old women and eventually left with stolen items. All three were later arrested.

“I’m very happy to say all those guys got 100-plus-year sentences so I know they’re not out on the streets,” Nisleit said.

Some cases don't have that kind of closure.

In the months before Anna Hernandez was killed in 2014, she dreamed of a perfect quinceañera, a celebration of a girl's 15th birthday, family members said. She envisioned her dress and the invitations. That day never came.

Anna's partially decomposed body was found in a ravine near Market and 29th streets in Grant Hill.

"In my opinion, we solved it, but there were no prosecutions," Nisleit said. "That leaves a sour taste in my mouth, to be honest with you."

Stephan said that as recently as two weeks ago the chief talked with her about Anna, hoping work on the case would continue. It's exactly the kind of dedication she's come to appreciate about Nisleit. The two had the opportunity to work closely together when she was chief of her officer's Sex Crimes and Human Trafficking Division and he was the lieutenant in charge of the department's Sex Crimes Unit.

"While it takes a second with his height and his uniform, I could see that the victims would, in a minute, let their guard down because this is a person who is there for them and wants to hear their story, who wants to bring them justice," she said.

That same compassion emerges when one of his officers is injured, she said.

"He is just transformed — it's as if a family member got hurt," she said. "He is right there, providing support."

Like after Sgt. Anthony Elliott was shot in the head in December — one of three officers to be shot in a 12-month period. Nisleit was in constant communication with the sergeant's family and at Elliott's side as often as he could be.

The sergeant survived. Several years earlier, two of Nisleit's detectives, Ryan Park and his wife, Jamie Huntley-Park, did not. The couple was killed by a wrong-way driver on Interstate 5 in 2021.

"Truly, I don't think I've wrestled through all of it, to be honest," he said.

And there were other challenges.

In the summer of 2020, protests over George Floyd's death swept across San Diego, reigniting local calls for police reform.

Nisleit did shepherd in some changes. He banned the carotid restraint, a controversial neck hold, and codified standalone de-escalation and duty-to-intervene policies. Still, some community advocates criticized him for shying away from bolder action — like limiting pretext stops.

During Nisleit's tenure, several studies of San Diego police stop data found that people of color — especially Black people — are stopped, searched and subjected to force at higher rates than their White counterparts. Those disparities remain.

And the department's staffing shortage also persists, despite being one of Nisleit's early goals. The department was making good progress until COVID-19 hit and the city of San Diego subsequently rolled out its controversial vaccine mandate. The rules led to the resignation of more than 130 officers, police officials contend.

"It was tough," the chief said. "It felt like everything I'd worked for was gone. And it felt like it happened overnight."

Nisleit was also forced to grapple with the death of both of his parents during his time as chief — his father less than a year ago.

But there were victories to point to, as well.

Less than two weeks into his stint as chief, Nisleit created the Neighborhood Policing Division, which helped centralize the department's response to homelessness and quality-of-life crimes.

He put together a ghost gun team to crack down on unserialized weapons, which are nearly impossible to trace. He also created a sixth homicide team.

Despite ups and downs, San Diego's crime rate remained near historic lows throughout Nisleit's tenure. He pushed early to have all officers outfitted with naloxone, a drug that reverses opioid overdoses, and cellphones. Before Nisleit, officers did not have department-issued phones.

Under Nisleit's leadership, the department also took seriously the different state laws that upped transparency requirements for police.

His department is often the fastest in the county at releasing body-worn camera footage from police shootings — a requirement under Assembly Bill 748, which went into effect in 2019.

He's made more than a few lifelong friends, with some relationships forged under unlikely circumstances.

Back in 2009, when Nisleit was a lieutenant, pastor Jesus Sandoval was turning his life around. The former gang member was working alongside other reformed gang members to find ways to give back to the communities they felt they took so much from.

There was some hesitation back then — working with people with felony convictions, some with serious criminal backgrounds. But Nisleit and some of his contemporaries saw what Sandoval and his ilk were trying to do.

“They were really the tip of the spear that pierced through the stigmas we were up against — that we created for ourselves really — but (Nisleit) was always rooting for us, always battling for us,” Sandoval said.

“He’s always believed in me. And not just me, but other former gang members,” said Sandoval, now executive director of the city’s Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention.

Nisleit’s final day is Thursday. Assistant Chief Scott Wahl, the chief select, will be sworn in Friday. It was not immediately clear what Nisleit’s annual pension would be, but he made upwards of \$310,000 a year and was in the city’s deferred retirement option plan, otherwise known as DROP.

The chief’s next chapter, in some ways, is still in the works.

Nisleit has always been dialed in to the legislative changes that shape policing across California, and, although he wasn’t specific, he said consulting is in his future. He’d like to get back to teaching — he used to be a professor at the University of San Diego.

He’s looking forward to spending time with his growing family. He and his wife Darlene have three children and now five grandchildren. Work-life balance is a hard thing to achieve in policing — particularly as chief — and Nisleit said he missed a lot when his kids were growing up.

He sees retirement as an opportunity to make up for lost time. The family’s legacy of policing continues with their son Ryan Nisleit, who is also a San Diego officer. The chief also has a son-in-law with the department.

But two things are certain: he’s going to travel, and he’s going to stay out of his wife’s hair.

“My wife has told me I can’t stay at home all the time because she has her routine that I can’t mess with.”

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