

# 15 MINUTES

## Above the city

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Charles Poole, in his pristine white painter's clothes and baseball cap, had a bird's eye view of a bustling Monday morning street corner in downtown Fort Myers.

He was attached to a "sling stage" by yellow harnesses and ropes, halfway up the side of a blue and white government building.

Although he was busy caulking, Mr. Poole could see the 9 a.m. crowd outside the Justice Center. It was in flux as court goers exited and entered through tinted automatic doors. There were traffic offenders holding yellow citations or family members who gave them a ride. A thick-necked attorney in a suit and shades was there to practice "commercial litigation." A 23-year-old who looked 16 had just received a favorable outcome on a "violation of parole" charge and wanted to find the nearest deli. Morning light sifted through clouds of cigarette smoke. Traffic hummed and hissed at a red light. One man with squinty eyes walked out the doors and stood on the steps for a moment, before making a slow, arching spit into the street; he was there for a felony arraignment. A Mexican woman who couldn't speak English sat on a stoop in the shadow of the building, holding a baby.

"I'll tell you what's going on at the Federal Courthouse," said Dewey

Mockler, a divorce attorney who was double timing it back to his office. "The (Samir) Cabrera trial starts today."

Mr. Poole, a waterproofer for Vic's Painting, came down off his perch and took a break around 10 a.m.

He walked over to the Justice Center, where he recognized a friend hanging around outside. It was a young man who had been in court for possession of marijuana, among other things. Mr. Poole, 47, offered him a few friendly words of advice. This is not uncommon.

After Mr. Poole moved to Fort Myers in 1985, he sometimes preaches about Christianity and dissuades youth from going down the dangerous road he was once on. He escaped violence, gangs and drugs rampant where he grew up, on the infamous streets of South Central Los Angeles.

"I've been through the whole deal," he said. "It's a little worse than what they show you in the movies."

Although if you did compare it to a movie, he said it was like a cross between "Boys n the Hood" and "Training Day."

His father, a gospel singer named James Poole, moved the family from North Florida to Los Angeles in the early 1960s and worked as a janitor at UCLA. He moved up the ranks there and retired at the end of 2008, after 40 years.

"I haven't seen him in almost 20 years," Mr. Poole said. "You stay in



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### Charles Poole

contact over the phone, but that's not enough."

He has a Zen attitude about his youth and the places he remembers. He was shot once in South Central L.A.

"It was what it was," Mr. Poole said. "Beverly Hills was Beverly Hills. Hollywood was Hollywood. South Central was South Central."

After a few brushes with death or at least the threat of it, Mr. Poole cherishes life. That may have come from being a father: he has two daughters, 16 and 21, and a 2½ year old son.

"In this movie, here," he said, talking about life, "you've only got one take. You don't get to do it again, so you have to do it right."

When he's not working, Mr. Poole likes to work on cars: two Cadillacs and a Chevrolet truck. He doesn't like to take much time off.

"Really, I've worked so much that's all I know," he said. "So when I'm not working, I get kind of bored."

He speaks about his job with a military man's sense of duty, pointing to the motto on his T-shirt and reading it out loud, with pride: "Committed to Excellence."

"I just love my job, period," he said, but added, "It's a dangerous job because I'm always in the air. Nothing man made is for sure — you just have to trust it when you go in the air."

After five years in similar work, he's avoided injury because he stays sharp, he said — mentally and physically. On one job, high up on the side of the former Ambassador Hotel in downtown, one of his feet slipped off the sling stage after a night without much sleep.

"Your mind has to be locked in when you're up there on the sling stage," he said.

When Mr. Poole went back up on the sling stage, his "game face" reappeared. Looking out over Monroe Street and the Justice Center, it contained a hint of the ferocity or hardness that might have helped him survive the mean streets of his youth. ■

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