

The Oregon

Fall 1996



# Police Chief



Official Publication of the Oregon Association of Chiefs of Police



## *Partnerships*

1241 State Street Suite 201  
Salem Oregon 97301

The professional voice of Oregon law enforcement



# Enhancing the Comfort Level

## *The Role of Minority Police Officers*

*By Malcus Williams II, Reserve Police Officer, Ashland Police Department*

**O**ur main objective as police officers, is to maintain an acceptable comfort level for the citizens we serve. Residents shouldn't have to worry about being victimized by the criminal element on a day-to-day basis. Don't get me wrong! People should be crime aware, they should be smart. Citizens should not walk through the rough part of town at night, talking on their cellular telephone with money hanging out of their pockets. However, people in our communities should be able to perform their normal daily routine within a certain comfort level. The interesting part is, a large percentage of the comfort zone is perceived. It's not how safe the citizens actually are. It's how safe they perceive themselves to be.

The citizens' perception has a great deal to do with how they view their police department. If people of the community see their police officers as intelligent, friendly, approachable and always helpful. Whether it be by telling someone the time, or by providing them direction, chances are with this kind of positive perception, the comfort level of this town will be reinforced. This is where minority police officers become an extremely important part of modern day law enforcement.

Let's talk about the perception of all these different types of people. Is the African American, the Asian, or the Latino family that moves into town where all the police officers are white, protected as well as the white citizens in the same town? Yes, of course they are! But the comfort level perceived might not be there for these minority families.

In being a minority police officer, it is important to not only do your basic job, but to get out and meet the citizens, the majority being Caucasian; frequent the local businesses, and maybe even take your family out for a picnic at the local park. As people experience this interaction, their comfort level should increase. A minority citizen that often sees a minority officer out and about and maybe even has spoken with on occasion, is likely to have an outlook like this: "This police officer who I see from day to day is a minority living in this town, just like me." The feeling of similarity builds a sense of security which in turn heightens the comfort level of the citizen.

I'm fortunate enough to be representing a police department that is at the forefront of creating an elevated comfort level by utilizing a diverse selection

of officers ranging from female to Latino. As police officers we are constantly in the public eye. Everyone of our actions is placed under a microscope. As a minority police officer, we are representing our race as well as our department. Thus we must be good role models both on and off the job.

Many people are still curious about minorities because obviously we stand out. A minority police officer might be the only Latino, Asian, or African American a Caucasian citizen has even had the chance to meet. So this social exchange with us, even if limited, could contribute to an entire new positive mindset for them.

There are time when your nontypical police officer may be utilized as an effective resource in police work. For example, a six year old girl raised by a single parent (mother) would be more apt to talk with a female officer, that in the little girls' eyes is somewhat like her "mom," rather than speaking with a six-foot, deep-voice male officer.

A police department which welcomes diversity opens up lines of communication that are often otherwise untapped. Diversity in a police department also provides more collective thought. With such, in-depth, conscious thinking, additional perspectives in crime investigation are explored and thereby a broader spectrum of problem solving skills may be utilized. Not only the citizens notice the depth and diversity in a police department. The criminal element does as well. A police department standing on a firm base of knowledge collectively built by many cultures, gender and varied backgrounds makes it more difficult for criminals to out think contemporary, unified law enforcement officials.

As minorities in law enforcement we must assist our male Caucasian partners to be aware of stereotyping. Stereotypes often project, "African American and Latinos are all gangbangers, Asians can't drive and women don't think, they just react emotionally." With contemporary awareness, we know these stereotypes are not true, but for many, these images are deep rooted and as such some believe them to be true to various degrees. Many times, originating with stereotypical beliefs, comes fear because the people haven't really encountered minorities on a social basis and what we don't know about others often frightens us.

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# For Your Information . . .

Changes that have occurred since the last issue of Oregon Police Chief

## OACP OFFERS CONGRATULATIONS TO THE FOLLOWING ON THEIR RETIREMENT:

Chief Darrell Hill, The Dalles, June 1996  
Chief Kent Owens, Brookings, September 1996  
Chief Art Knori, Gresham, January 1997

## ANNOUNCING NEW APPOINTMENTS:

Chief Jay Waterbury, The Dalles  
Chief Bernie Guisto, Gresham  
Chief Robert Glynn, Bend  
Chief Michael Reaves, Coquille  
Chief Terry Wright, Myrtle Point

## OACP IS SORRY TO REPORT THE DEATH OF RETIRED CHIEF CLIFFORD BETHSCHIEDER THIS SUMMER.

Please send anything that would be appropriate to include in this column to the OACP offices:  
1241 Sate St., Suite 201, Salem, OR 97301.

## Enhancing the Comfort Level . . . continued

When I was in the first grade, growing up in Eugene, I was picked on by an older boy about my color. In a meeting with a counselor, we found out the bully's father had raised him to hate African Americans, although he had never actually met one prior to me. After the counselor had convinced the boy that everyone is basically the same regardless of skin color, in time the older boy and I became good friends. That's just one example of a person with deep-seated beliefs that were only altered after he'd met his first African American.

One can see why it is so important that young people's role models are positive figures. As police officers, whether male or female, black or white, we are role models. Today, many athletes are claiming not to be role models. What are they thinking? We don't choose to be role models, it's automatic with the job. However, we can choose what kind of role model we want to be. So no matter who we are, no matter

where we are, and no matter what kind of day we are having, we are still role models. That's a huge responsibility. As minority role models we often provide minority children with hope. We can help them realize that they're not predestined to a certain life-style just because of the color of their skin. With positive role models, young people can achieve victory . . . victory in school, victory in jobs, and victory in life. Everything we do, everything we say, shapes how a young person thinks of themselves.

As minority police officers, we must be forgiving, we must be positive role models and above all else, we must strive to elevate the comfort level for everyone in our community everyday, irrespective of their ethnicity, gender or economic status.

Police officers are often the most misunderstood minority in society. We who wear a badge are all one, regardless of color or gender.

