

# Alabama Voices: Civil rights, wrongs

5:09 PM, Aug. 27, 2011  
Montgomery Advertiser

By J. Christopher Murphy

Before taking the oath of office to protect and to serve, every Montgomery police officer completes at least 18 weeks of training at the Montgomery Police Academy. There, they learn the essentials of their jobs, including firearms, emergency vehicle operation, criminal law, constitutional law, ethics, investigative techniques, and other law enforcement coursework.

Montgomery police officers are now learning another essential part of their jobs with the introduction of a new, forward-leaning history lesson, "Policing in a Historic City: Civil Rights and Wrongs in Montgomery." The curriculum focuses on cultural diversity and bias-based policing in an examination of policing in Alabama's capital city, with its dual identities as both the Cradle of the Confederacy and the Birthplace of Civil Rights.

Why is a history lesson important for police officers? I believe the answer lies in law enforcement's understanding of its role and relationship with the community it serves. It lies in the understanding that as a department and as a city, we are not defined solely by the present. We also must understand the past and look to the future.

Our intent was to develop training that examines policing within the historical and cultural contexts of Montgomery. "Policing in a Historic City" opens with Dred Scott and continues with an examination of landmark civil rights cases and events in the United States. The focus then narrows to Alabama. From the Scottsboro Boys and Recy Taylor to the Rev. James Reeb and Bull Conner, the curriculum reviews the people and events that have shaped the struggle for civil rights in our state.

Enriching this new curriculum is a partnership with Troy University Montgomery and the Rosa Parks Museum, a partnership inspired by the FBI and its work with the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Anti-Defamation League. MPD Chief Kevin Murphy and I both have taken part in "Lessons of the Holocaust," which features a visit to the Holocaust Memorial Museum led by a Holocaust survivor.

"It makes our people think about morality, ethics, and how to maintain those during turbulent times," says the FBI special agent who teaches the course. "It shows how important it is for law enforcement to maintain their core values."

Chief Murphy and I found "Lessons of the Holocaust" to be a powerful curriculum for law enforcement officers seeking to understand the line between right and wrong. Here in Montgomery, we believe the Rosa Parks Museum and its expression of the

Montgomery Bus Boycott can help further law enforcement's understanding of civil rights and wrongs in Alabama.

Every Montgomery Police officer will visit the Rosa Parks Museum, touring its exhibits with Director Georgette Norman and her staff, and engaging in discussion about what it meant in 1955 -- and what it means in 2011 and beyond -- to police in a historic city.

Montgomery Mayor Todd Strange, Troy Chancellor Dr. Jack Hawkins, and Ms. Norman have proven essential to the development of this partnership program. They have provided invaluable support and share our vision for a substantive and ambitious program that helps increase professionalism, foster dialogue and understanding, and strengthen law enforcement and community relationships.

"Policing in a Historic City" also examines more recent events that are woven into the MPD's relationship with the community it serves. The Whitehurst Case in the mid-1970s, the Todd Road Incident in the 1980s, the Third-shift Debacle of 2002, and Phillip Moultrie's sentencing in 2011 all hold lessons for today's police officers.

We know that law enforcement agencies that focus strictly on "crime reduction" and that fail in community policing are less effective, disconnected from the public, and susceptible to the pitfalls of bias-based tactics.

That is not the Montgomery Police Department of 2011, which is working to engage the Montgomery community openly and candidly. Yes, we are committed to driving down crime, and we want to bring about increased public safety in partnership with the public. To do that, we must understand our own history and the formative events in our relationship with the Montgomery community.

*J. Christopher Murphy is director of public safety for the city of Montgomery.*