

Impacting the Community One Haircut at a Time

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When we think about community engagement, many times we immediately go to the lighter side of engagement-parks, area plans, trails, and things most communities would love to discuss. But what happens when there is a need to tackle a tough and sensitive issue? Are we just as committed to engaging the community? Well, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) is certainly showing this commitment. With the recent initiative, Cops & Barbers, CMPD created a forum for open, honest dialogue on police and race relations in the African American community. The idea was simple. Meet people where they are and where they routinely go (the barber shop) and start a conversation between officers and people of all ages in the community. The response was overwhelming and exemplified community engagement at its best.

The Cops & Barbers initiative was started by CMPD Police Chief Rodney Monroe (set to retire July 1) and his barber Gene Winchester, owner of Fourth Ward Barber & Hairstyle. This initiative

provides a unique way for the community and the officers who serve them to work together to tackle a sensitive and important topic. But the conversations didn't just stop at the barber shop. CMPD partnered with the North Carolina Local Barbershop Association to coordinate monthly town hall meetings and together, they have committed to 13 meetings this year to be held in various locations throughout Charlotte.

During these town hall meetings, members of the community learn about their rights and the appropriate way to handle themselves when coming in contact with the police. Additionally, participants are informed of the appropriate manner with which officers must conduct themselves when engaging with the public. Officers of every rank participate in the interactive sessions which feature use of a Mobile Firearms Training Simulator (FATS) so community members can experience the split second decisions officers are often forced to make. CMPD estimates nearly 1,100 community members have attended the four sessions held so far.

A simple, yet impactful idea has turned into a form of community engagement that gives diverse groups a better understanding of the role community and police. At a recent City Council Meeting, various members of the community praised CMPD and Chief Monroe highlighting the intentional efforts being made to form a better relationship between police and the community. In the midst of what we are seeing on a national stage and the tense relationship between the police and some

communities, it was refreshing to see the tremendous impact community engagement can have, especially when it's a difficult topic. What would seem as two very different sides of the fence are building bridges to connect the community in a way that will have a lasting, positive impact.

Isn't it amazing to think about how much power a conversation holds? I'd venture to guess that there are people in the community who never sat down to talk with an officer and likewise, I am sure that the stories some of the officers heard through these conversations have been unique and eye-opening. Through this engagement, barriers were broken down and experiences were shared that have laid a new foundation for police-community relations in this city. This may be one step, but it's a big one. There is a new perspective that both the police and the community can appreciate. There is a mutual feeling that the dialogue is ok to have because if we want to improve something, we can't shy away from it. We must confront it in a constructive and open manner.

At the core of community engagement, there must be a true commitment to addressing the very things that impact the community the most. CMPD recognized this need and the community responded. There is more work to be done and more opportunities to be identified but what has been started is something of great impact and can bring about genuine change.

Cops & Barbers was recently highlighted by the White House as part of a progress report on police-community relations since the establishment of the national 21st Century Policing Taskforce. The Foundation for the Carolinas also awarded a \$10,000 grant to help expand the initiative. Special thanks to Ashley Simmons with the Charlotte Mayor's Office for her contributions to this post.