

Bridge over troubled waters



Residents listen as an officer with the Winston-Salem Police Department makes suggestions on how to improve the relationship with residents during the Black & Blue Town Hall on Thursday, July 28.

BY TEVIN STINSON
THE CHRONICLE

The Winston-Salem Urban League (WSUL) is looking to bridge the gap between the African-American community and law enforcement here in the city and throughout Forsyth County.

On Thursday, July 28, the nonprofit organization kicked off Part One of the Black and Blue Community Town Halls, a three-part open forum designed to bring both residents and police together to discuss ways to improve their relationship. WSUL President and CEO James Perry said, "Resolving tensions between police and the African-American community is of the utmost importance."

"African-American residents in Winston-Salem seek a trusting relationship with police and the Winston-Salem police department is committed to protect and serve," he continued. "I am confident that through constructive dialogue, we can overcome challenges and prevent the atrocities that have affected Baton Rouge, Dallas, St. Louis, Ferguson, Chicago, New York and countless other cities."

To begin the forum held at the WSUL headquarters, Dr. Corey D.B. Walker, Winston-Salem State University dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, gave a brief history on the distrust between the Winston-Salem Police Department (WSPD) and the African-American community.

Walker's history lesson began downtown in 1895 with an African-American named James Tuttle, who was accused of killing an officer during a scuffle. As a result, a race riot broke out and several blacks lost their lives protecting Tuttle from white residents who were angry about the officer's death.

According to Walker, the riot received national media attention.

"In many ways we think about policing in a context when we have institutional policing," he continued. "We have laws, we have a legal apparatus, and a judicial apparatus. But, that grows out of a long history of struggle on how to control black bodies."

The travel through time then moved on to an incident in 1918 where five African-American men were killed by police officers. The lesson ended in 1967 with the death of James Eller, who was hit over the head by a police officer while sitting on his front porch. A warrant filed for the officer responsible for Eller's death was denied by the WSPD.

Walker noted that it's not only the legacy of slavery that becomes the issue but the way people think about black people in America has become encoded in our institutional structures.

He stated, "Our laws, our criminal justice system, becomes designed to contain black bodies to a particular space, place, and identity."

Following Walker's presentation, the crowd of more than 100 attendees were broken into several groups. Then forum moderators - founder of the Institute for Dismantling Racism, Rev. Willard Bass Jr., and Salem College assistant professor sociology and criminal studies Kimya Dennis - presented questions regarding recent news reports about police brutality, and suggestions on how to improve the relationship between law enforcement and the community.

When asked how she felt about the recent rise in reports showing blacks being killed while in the custody of police, city native Kenya Harley said she tries not to look at it because she knows the harsh reality, that it could happen to one of her family members.

"It's hard to look at that type of stuff on the news," she continued. "Because that could be my brother, or my cousin, or another member of my family. It's sad but that's what we are faced with in the black community."

Isaac "Ike" Howard, president of the Winston-Salem NAACP branch, said, "Along with addressing the criminology aspect of the issue, we must not forget to address the issue of poverty."

"If we don't address the growing issue of poverty in African-American communities across the nation, we will never see any changes."

After the forum, Birmingham, Alabama, native Tim Jackson told *The Chronicle* that what we are seeing today is nothing new. Jackson said, although he has never had any run-ins with police, as a young boy growing up in Alabama during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, he saw injustice on a daily basis.

Jackson mentioned that he decided to attend the forum because he believes to make a difference, every voice must be heard.

"I tell people all the time, the only difference between then and now is, today everybody has cameras to record what is really going on," he said. "We know this has been going on in our communities for generations. Now it's time that we come together and think of some real solutions."

According to a representative with the WSUL, Part Two of the forum, scheduled for Thursday, Aug. 18, will focus on presenting possible solutions gathered from Part One to members of the WSPD.

While an exact date has not been set, Part Three will be held sometime in the fall and will feature 2014 Stanford University professor Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt as the keynote speaker.

Photo by Tevin Stinson

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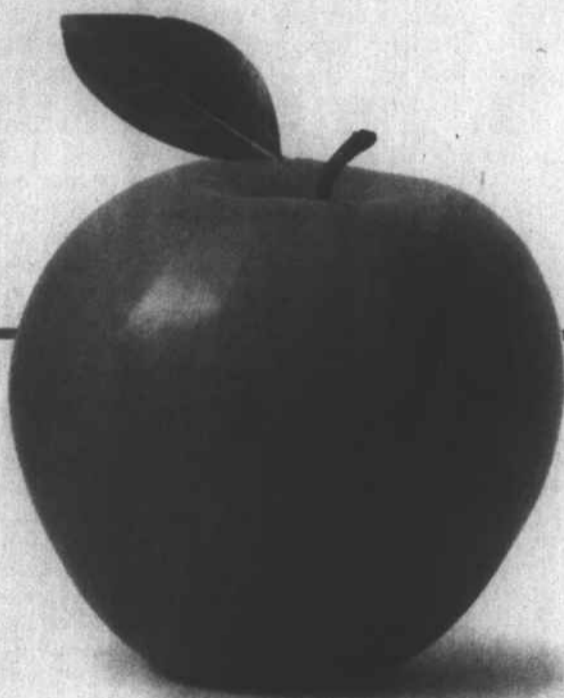
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