

Town copes with 'racist' label

By DEAN GOLEMESKI
Associated Press Writer

ROCKY HILL, Conn. -- Police Lt. John C. Herbst began his personal campaign against racism in this affluent Hartford suburb when he called back a patrol car that was sent to investigate "two Puerto Rican-looking fellows."

It was April 7, 1987; Herbst said no crime had been reported and argued that the police dispatcher had acted largely on the appearance of the two men, who were seen near a car in a department store parking lot. A town council member complained when it turned out that a car had been stolen.

Two days later, Herbst filed a complaint against a police sergeant who allegedly used the word "nigger" during conversation in headquarters. Herbst, who is white, criticized the "pervasive racism" in the department.

The lieutenant's fight snowballed into a bitter dispute with local authorities and helped prompt an investigation by the state Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities.

The commission concluded Jan. 14 that the police department and town government are plagued by discriminatory attitudes and behavior.

"They don't think they're being bigoted or racist. They think it's OK," said Herbst. "They must think it's OK because they made the same comments to a human rights investigator. That shows how entrenched it (discrimination) is here."

Some of the comments residents and employees made to the investigator were that blacks and Puerto Ricans are responsible for most crime in this town of 15,600 residents. According to the 1980 census, only 331 of them were black out of a total 4 percent or 600 minorities. The human rights commission said it found one family with a Hispanic surname.

The lone black employee in the police department of about 50 people, a female dispatcher referred to as a "crow" in a police radio transmission last July, resigned last week. She declined to be interviewed.

Meanwhile, the report by the human rights commission has embarrassed some in Rocky Hill, while others have tried to rationalize its findings.

"I don't see any more of a racist problem here than I see in any other town. ... Obviously that's not a good thing," said the Rev.

Michael Motta of St. James Roman Catholic Church.

"The report indicates that there's some lack of sensitivity, and I think it's the same here as it is in most suburban communities," said Town Manager Dana T. Whitman Jr.

But Arthur L. Green, executive director of the commission, said it's a "silly argument" to say the town has the same problems as others.

"You could assume it's elsewhere, but we have not looked at other communities. And I don't want to suggest that it doesn't matter because it's happening elsewhere. That's an immoral attitude," Green said.

In his 11 years on the force, Herbst says, some officers made it a practice to stop minorities on the street on the assumption that they were up to no good.

He recalled an incident a couple of years ago in which police responded to a call to check out a suspicious person at a bus stop. Police found a black man dressed in a three-piece suit waiting to take the bus to work.

But Herbst's lone stand has met with fierce resistance.

Soon after he called back the patrol car last April, a member of the town council filed a complaint questioning Herbst's actions. A car had been stolen from the parking lot, although it was never determined if that was the car that the "Puerto Rican-looking" men were

near and no suspects were ever found.

Herbst defended his actions in an internal report to Police Chief Philip Schnabel, complaining about "pervasive racism" in the department.

Town council members made the report public, reacting bitterly to the comment on racism. They demanded a public apology and ordered the chief to penalize Herbst. Herbst refused to apologize, and the chief sided with him.

"Everything I said I was able to document," Herbst said.

Outside the police department, the town has one black and one individual with a Hispanic surname among its 97 full-time employees, the state commission found.

Town officials told the commission that Rocky Hill's high cost of living has kept minorities out. The town's per-capita income was \$13,356 in 1983, compared to a statewide average of \$11,897, according to census figures for that year.

In response to the commission report and recommendations, the chief has issued written policies forbidding offensive comments by police officers and the stopping of individuals because of race or ethnicity.

"It's not a problem of training," Schnabel said. "It's an attitude, a lack of awareness that constitutional rights apply to everyone."

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examinations. He said the union's executive board will present the compromises of the mediation to the membership for final acceptance.

Ritchey said that he never really expected the situation to get to the point where a strike would have been necessary and likened the parties' disagreement to that of a misunderstanding between two good friends.

"We had an honest disagreement between friends and I believe we've settled it," said Ritchey. "I believe this compromise will work well for us."

Dunlap agreed that the two sides have settled their differences and will put the dispute behind them.

"We respected his position and he respected ours," Dunlap said. "We came to an impasse and that's why we called for mediation. Now we agree and we're back on good terms."

CORRECTION

In the Jan. 14, 1988, edition of the Chronicle, Mr. Ricardo Rozier's name was misspelled on the advertisement of the Morehouse Men saluting the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. We regret the error, and hope it has not caused any inconvenience.

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