COMMUNITY POLICING AND MINORITIES:
Constant contact helps break down barriers
by Florene McGlothian-Taylor

Editor's Note: We have invited the husband and wife team of Dr. Carl S. Taylor and Florene McGlothian-Taylor to share their insights on Community Policing and Minorities. Carl is a professor of criminal justice at Grand Valley State University, where he is also director of the Center for Urban Youth studies. He is also the noted author of two books on gangs, Dangerous Society, on Detroit's male youth gangs, and Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs, both of which are available from the MSU Press. Florene is currently a Community Policing Officer for Michigan State University's Department of Public Safety, the first black female hired on the force. She earned a bachelor's degree in urban studies and a master's in education.

Historically, relationships between minorities and the police have not been the best. Many minorities viewed police as the oppressor; however, Community Policing is helping to change their view, by allowing minorities to observe Community Policing Officers working with residents to help make their neighborhoods safer.

One way that Community Policing addresses that concern is by providing minority children the chance to experience positive interaction with police at an early age, the time when the crucial first impressions are formed. Because Community Policing allows youngsters to know the officers on their beat on a first-name basis, they can see that police officers don't just make arrests, give tickets, or beat and shoot people. Community Policing shows both children and adults that the police are there to help them make the community better, whether by handling specific complaints about crimes, dealing with disorder, or assisting in organizing community activities.

My experience as a Community Policing Officer on campus allows me to see firsthand how this approach can help the police deal with diversity. My beat encompasses the southwestern part of the campus, and I maintain an office in a residence hall called Holden. Policing on a college campus requires serving the needs of faculty, staff, and students, and it is also unique because students are a transient population. For many students, it is their first time away from home, on their own, and they know that they will be moving on to a new life once their college career is over. Most of the students in my beat are young singles, and many are athletes, including
members of the football and basketball teams. The area also houses a number of black students involved in fraternities, sororities, and student organizations, and there are also a number of students from other countries.

I chose police work as a career because of a desire to make a contribution, and the opportunities for interacting one-on-one in Community Policing allows me to do so in important ways. In my years in policing, for example, I have noted that other minorities will look to me for cues. Some want assurance that they are not being singled out and that they are being accorded equal respect. Others look to me for an indication of how to respond. The presence of a black female on the force often signals to them that the department is sensitive to their concerns.

The job also allows me to serve as a role model for others. In a general sense, my role as a Community Policing Officer can reinforce the benefits of staying in school to get the education required to secure a job that allows me to help others and which implies respect for the law. For example, during the summer months, a number of different programs bring junior high and high school students to campus. Some include youngsters who may be considering attending MSU in the future, while others are geared toward providing enrichment to disadvantaged students. I often give presentations and also have the opportunity for personal interaction with these youngsters, which allows me to talk with them about the problems and challenges they face.

One effort that I feel strongly about is teaching women how to protect themselves from sexual assault, and being female myself gives me a special kind of credibility. This year, our department inaugurated what we call our Sexual Assault Guarantee, as our way of assuring victims that we are there to help. We feel that this is an important outreach, since statistics for 1990 showed that only 10 sexual assaults were reported to our department, yet 120 were reported to the Counseling Center on campus.

I can also serve as a role model for other women and minorities who may be considering a career in law enforcement. Many people think of the police as macho, and my experience on the job shows that you can prevent situations from getting out of control by encouraging people to be cooperative. Not that I haven't had my share of stops where people are upset at being confronted by the police. But I have found that open and honest communication can help to defuse the situation. All police officers must be ready, willing, and able to use force when necessary, but the best solution is to control and calm the situation so that force is not necessary.

Community Policing also allows me the time and opportunity to make friends among the students on my beat, and their cooperation is invaluable. For one thing, they provide me the information that I need to do a good job. For another, I have students who will help me.

For example, this past spring term, some students were upset that alumni are allowed to hold tailgate parties with alcohol on campus, while they are not. Students who know me and trust me reported that a group of disgruntled students, most of them minorities, were intending to hold a tailgater of their own, both as a protest and as an opportunity for some fun.

About 300 students showed up at a field in my beat for their impromptu party, and there was undoubtedly the opportunity for the situation to escalate out of control. When I arrived on the scene, accompanied by several DPS officers, I knew a number of the students in the crowd, and I approached them first, explaining my concerns. Some students were parking on the grass. Others had set up loud music piped through speakers. I explained to the students that I knew that my job required me to issue tickets unless they desisted. Of course, I was met with the argument that the alumni are allowed to park on the grass. But I pointed out that the students had not secured the necessary permits to do so, and that the university collects a parking fee at sanctioned events to pay for the repair and maintenance of the fields used for parking. And the alumni do not blast music as decibel levels that violate the laws about excessive noise. By explaining to them that there were good reasons that this unsanctioned event would require me to issue tickets, they were willing to act on my behalf in urging their peers to remove their cars and turn down the music. Even students who didn't know me
personally were willing to listen to their peers. While there was the potential for tensions to erupt, we only had to make one arrest that night, for a traffic accident.

Each campus has its own unique character and its own unique problems. At MSU, we find that many of our problems come from visitors who are not students. Unlike white fraternities and sororities, which are located off campus and which therefore come to the attention of the East Lansing Police Department, the black Greeks do not have houses, so they rely on campus facilities, where different rules apply, and where the campus police have responsibility. Unfortunately, some events involving the black fraternities have had problems with violence, including a tragic shooting incident a few years ago. Part of my job includes working with these students to ensure that their events are safe, and to reassure them that they are not being singled out for undue police attention merely because of the issue of race.

While the young often tend to think that they are immortal, safety is a serious concern. I was approached recently by a young women from Italy who was studying here who wanted to know whether it would be safe for her to attend a basketball game. In her culture, soccer games have been known to turn violent, and she wanted to know if similar violence might erupt at sporting events here. Dealing with the concerns of students from other cultures not only allows me to help them learn about our ways, but it also helps me to learn about their experience.

The job also allows me to be proactive. Working with the residents of Holden Hall, we were able to raise $300 this year to buy a piece of playground equipment for the children who live in the Cherry Lane Apartments across the street. Cherry Lane is not part of my beat, but the youngsters from that complex often play in the street that adjoins Holden Hall, and the students that I work with are concerned that these youngsters might be injured. Next year, we intend to challenge other residence halls on campus to equal or exceed what we raised, so that we can provide these kids with the recreational equipment that will encourage them to play where it is safe.

Some say that Community Policing is just a fad, and that it is just a throwback to the days of the foot patrol officer. However, today's Community Policing Officers are a bit of the old, but with a new dimension. Sometimes we travel on foot and, at times, some of us use a vehicle. But the difference today is that we listen to what people tell us, and we try to act on their concerns. Community Policing is a joint effort by all, and it must be if we are to deter crime and make places safe for everyone. And, in order for it to work properly, minorities must begin to trust again and become part of the solution, not just sit back and complain. Minorities must hold their Community Policing Officers accountable, but they cannot do this unless they are willing to become active participants.