

# Commentary

## Police and Community Come Together



**DIALOGUE** — The participants of session four of the series include, at rear, from left, Darnell Turner, Police Chief Kevin Mearn, Gisele Michel, Brian Cherry, Maria Poles, Ricka Marsh, Cheryl Sweeting, Vicki Nelson, Michael Cherry and Rev. George Wells; center, from left, Deborah Felton and Jeff Stone; at the forefront, from left, Josh Martinez, Rachel Vicente and Pauline Tuy.

By Jeff Stone  
**No Place for Hate**

Nobody was quite sure what would happen when seven police officers and about 15 adults and high school students agreed to come together to talk about tough issues.

Police Chief Kevin Mearn, his officers and community members agreed to participate in a facilitated community-police dialogue series with the goal of building new understanding, trust and positive relationships.

In four sessions held in May and June, there was a productive dialogue that combined both lighthearted and uncomfortable moments.

Although the process was not always easy, most participants agreed with the view expressed by resident Darnell Turner that, "there was a great opening between the community members and the police in the room and the most important thing now is how we follow up."

Milton's No Place for Hate Committee proposed the dialogue series and the police department agreed to sponsor it. Three members of the committee — Deborah Felton, Ricka Marsh and myself — planned the logistics with Chief Mearn.

The initiative was envisioned as a positive step in the spirit of good community policing after two suc-

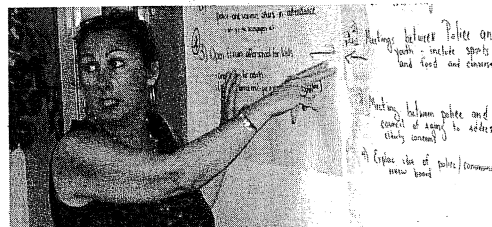
cessful public forums last year on police and race relations in Milton. The professional dialogue co-facilitators were Paula Parnagian of World View Services and Gisele Michel, a former resident. Participants met in a community space at Winter Valley generously provided by Milton Residences for the Elderly. Supper at each session was provided by the police department and it became another opportunity for socializing and bonding.

The residents and police officers were racially and ethnically diverse and a main purpose of the dialogue was to provide a chance for officers of the police department to get to know community members, particularly people of color, and for people in the community to know our police officers.

"It was time well spent," said Chief Mearn. "I came away with a different view on some issues and look forward to working together with students and community members in a very cooperative spirit."

In the final session on June 26, the facilitators asked participants to brainstorm possible follow-up activities and then prioritize them for action. The group agreed to work on three sessions that will continue to foster good police-community relations: More friendly participation and interaction by police officers at selected school events to be proposed to school officials; an open forum with police after school just for students; and an open forum with police for both adults and students.

Participants formed project teams, made up of both community members and police officers, that will organize these activities.



**SHARING IDEAS** — Dialogue facilitator Paula Parnagian reviews proposed action ideas with participants.