

15 Years After Violent Clashes, Fragile Accord Being Redrawn

WASHINGTON POST
MAY 7, 2006

In 1991, Miguel Solis watched Mount Pleasant erupt in violence. Yesterday, he joined dozens of Latino residents in a dialogue with D.C. police on the anniversary of the clashes that shocked the nation and revealed the deep alienation of the District's new immigrants.

So much has changed over the past 15 years: Nearly all the city and police officials addressed the crowd in Spanish -- or at least tried. Yesterday's session was held in the spanking new, \$55 million Bell Multicultural High School off 16th Street NW, an institution designed to accommodate the needs of immigrants.

But it was clear that some Latinos still felt frustration with the police, albeit less than in 1991, when the shooting of a Salvadoran man by a rookie officer sparked three days of burning, looting and fighting that left dozens wounded.

Solis, a 41-year-old Nicaraguan immigrant, acknowledged that police are better trained today. But, he told the crowd of nearly 100, it still takes officers too long to respond to residents' calls.

"They hear the Latino accent, and the police don't come," he said.

A police officer, Pedro Garcia, responded that calls were handled in order of priority. If residents feel they are being ignored, they can call the police Latino Liaison Unit, Garcia said.

"It's important to have communication," the Puerto Rican-born officer said. "If you have the impression the police don't come, we have to see: Why is that?"

The clashes that broke out May 5, 1991, in Mount Pleasant -- just two miles north of the White House -- were the city's worst since the 1968 riots. At yesterday's meeting, Gustavo Velasquez, director of the Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs, recalled the toll: 230 people arrested; 50 wounded, many of them police officers; 81 buses and police cars vandalized; and three dozen businesses damaged.

An investigation by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission into the underlying causes of the disturbances found that Latinos in Washington were routinely abused by police and were denied "basic civil rights to an extent that is appalling."

"It was another world," Saul Solorzano, a Salvadoran-born community activist, said at yesterday's meeting. "We didn't understand we were a part of Washington, D.C."

Both Latino residents and police officers acknowledged yesterday that progress has been uneven in the intervening years. But today, there are 244 Latino officers in the D.C. police department, about double the number at the time of the Mount Pleasant disturbances. Hispanics make up 8.5 percent of police personnel, Velasquez said.

There is also the Latino Liaison Unit, made up of 11 officers based in Adams Morgan, as well as a gang intervention unit.

That expansion is part of an overall growth in services for the city's Hispanics, who make up about 8 percent of the population, according to the 2000 Census. The budget for the Mayor's

Office on Latino Affairs, for example, has grown 27 percent in the past three years, to more than \$5 million, Velasquez said. Much of that money is passed on to community organizations that serve low-income Hispanics.

"I don't think anyone can assert that something like we saw 15 years ago could happen again," Velasquez said in an interview.

Many activists, police and other meeting participants backed his view.

Garcia was a rookie officer working in Southeast Washington when the civil unrest occurred. He was called in to help with crowd control.

"It was really shocking to see what was going on," said the beefy officer, who then transferred to the Mount Pleasant area. Now, after years of working in the community, he is a familiar presence, chatting with teenagers on the streets and organizing meetings in immigrants' homes to break down barriers.

"Before, we had no communication. Now, we have some. And some is better than none," he said.

In an interview, Solorzano noted that Latino representatives have more regular, institutionalized meetings with city representatives to address problems. City agencies are required to provide interpreters and translations of documents in Spanish. And police are banned from asking immigrants who are reporting crimes about their immigration status.

The changes extend to the Latino community itself, Solorzano said. At the time of the Mount Pleasant disturbances, many Hispanics were relatively recent arrivals from El Salvador and other Central American countries torn apart by war.

Today, "people are more aware in terms of civic participation. There are more people who are citizens," Solorzano said.

Still, much work remains to be done, according to police and residents. For example, Eugenio Arene, head of the Council of Latino Agencies, said that the police Latino Liaison Unit was a great idea -- but that until recently it was hindered by poor leadership.

Juan Valdes, 49, a dishwasher who lives in Columbia Heights, was among those who has seen a transformation in the police. On the night of the Mount Pleasant shooting 15 years ago, he came back to his neighborhood in the evening, saw the destruction and "ran home out of fear."

Last month, the Salvadoran immigrant didn't hesitate to call police when he was jumped by a gang of youths who beat him and stole a bag of tostadas. Police "came to my home in a minute," he said.

When a police officer called to tell him about yesterday's meeting, Valdes readily agreed to attend.

"The police treat you much differently," Valdes said. "They really pay more attention to you."