

## Cheektowaga police confront personal biases

By Rich Newberg, News 4 Senior Correspondent Published: April 23, 2015, 8:05 pm

CHEEKTOWAGA, N.Y. (WIVB) — Chief David Zack has only one African American officer in the department. Recruiting has been difficult.

But now the men and women of the Cheektowaga Police Department are learning how to better handle a diverse community and confront their own personal biases.

Dr. Lorie Fridell, a national expert in fair and impartial policing has been meeting with commanders and rank and file officers this week, teaching them how to win the trust and confidence of the people they serve.

“You’re human like the rest of us,” she tells them, “and we need to talk about how your mind works.”

She draws them out and makes them realize how they are not cognizant of the extent to which race, gender, sexual preference, and socio-economic status might impact their decision-making behaviors.

With the conscience of America shaken by incidents of police use of deadly force, the time is right for this kind of training, according to Chief Zack.

“These are difficult conversations to have,” he says, “They’re difficult topics to address, and I think we have the courage to face them head on.”

There have been many demonstrations in Buffalo following the deaths of African American citizens confronting white police officers.

Kenneth Young, an African-American who heads the Town Park Community Association in Cheektowaga, said the police want to “turn a page...just looking at everybody as one.” Young is running for a seat on the Cheektowaga Town Council.

Chief Zack says white officers on his force have demonstrated restraint during several instances that could have escalated into deadly violence.

During a July 4th incident at Cheektowaga Town Park, an officer observed the butt of a handgun sticking out of the waistband of a young teenager.

The officer tackled the teen, retrieved the gun. No one was hurt or beaten. It turned out to be a bb gun.

Within minutes a fight broke out in front of the town’s recreation center. A young teenager pulled out a Rambo-style hunting knife. The chief said he threatened the officers with it in a potential deadly use of force encounter.

He says officers talked to him instead of drawing their guns. Another officer came in and tackled the man. That officer suffered a slash to his arm.

In another case, during a brawl at the Walden Galleria, fights among about forty people were broken up by a captain who happened to be on patrol that night.

He used pepper spray and made seven arrests.

His handling of the incident drew praise from the community.

“It was handled very well by a white officer and black constituents that were at odds with each other,” said Dr. James Lewis, the department’s chaplain.

Lewis, who is African-American, said the captain had a “proactive mindset.”

During a break from the Fair and Impartial Policing seminary, Dr. Fridell told reporters “The chief brought us up here not because he was facing a fire storm, (but) because he’s getting ahead of what is a national issue.”