

05-30-08 Know and Be Known

When I was an adolescent, it was a time of discontent and rebellion against authority figures. The boys grew their hair long simply because they were expected to keep it short. There were protests of the war in Viet Nam. We hung out on street corners and talked, as teenagers do, about music and what to do, “what was happening”. The police were referred to as “pigs” and frequently told us questioning teenagers to move along. There was to be no loitering. I recall that there was an anti-pig campaign in an attempt to convince people, especially young people, that pigs were clean, kind and intelligent.

That was a long time ago and I haven’t rebelled against authority for the sake of being a rebel in a very long time. As a parent, I became an authority figure and my children would rebel against me. As my peers and I aged, we learned from life and we realized that individuals are not to be generalized and we realized that leadership and authority are a necessity for the governance of groups.

While governance might be necessary and wise, that governance requires a lot of enforcement. Laws are to be enforced. And so, we live in a world of tickets, fines and court hearings because some people do not follow the laws.

Did you ever wonder if your local police department does anything other than enforcement? When I was a child, I was taught that the police were there to help and to assist, to bring order to unruly situations and save lives in dangerous situations.

What about an ordinary day, though? Would an ordinary day give opportunity for saving lives, for restoring our faith in humanity?

Last Sunday was just such a day in Halifax. Just when most people were preparing or eating supper, on a lovely holiday weekend, a discovery was made in Halifax, requiring action, trust and knowledge.

Sitting on a curbside, with no place to go, no place to call home, there was a family, with its few belongings. They had no food or water. They had not eaten in more than a day.

When discovered, they were not told to move along for loitering. They were assisted.

It was discovered, through conversation with the adolescent daughter who had a working command of the English language, that her family had been kicked out from a home where they had been staying. The host family agreed to let the family from Kosovo live in their house while her sister was waiting for an operation and was receiving medical treatments. For whatever reasons, the host family had changed their mind and told the family from Kosovo to leave.

I received a call from a police officer, late in the afternoon on Sunday, given a quick summary, as he was busy contacting CERT members to help also. I was informed that the immediate need was a meal. The officer wanted to know if I could find a source for one meal for this family of two adults and three children? I hoped that I could and told the officer I would call him back shortly.

I thought about it. I knew that a certain large restaurant in Halifax had a history of donations and assisting in times of need, such as in November for Thanksgiving. I thought that we should not always depend on one source. I thought that we should diversify our sources and give others the opportunity to respond. I made only one call.

I asked if the restaurant owner was on site and was told “No, but he is available if necessary.” I summarized the situation for Amanda, the manager, and was, without hesitation, told that they absolutely could and would, not only provide, but would also deliver, a meal for six (to be on the safe side) to the police station.

Within twenty minutes, a warm, hearty meal of chicken, potatoes, vegetables, bread, pizza, milk and juice were delivered to the Halifax Police Station, as the family awaited for their national embassy in Cambridge to assist them with housing.

Public health does include and does not get more basic than food and housing. How rewarding it is, though, to realize that knowledge at the local level makes it all happen. That knowledge includes familiarity with names, faces, voices and reputations. I recognized the voice of and trusted the officer; Amanda recognized my name and voice, believed my claims to be valid and twenty minutes later, a family was fed.

That one event put to the test my knowledge of the town, my ability to stay in touch with emergency responders and the need for back-up plans (a.k.a., continuity of operations). Most of all, though, I knew that there were good people, willing to help others at a moment's notice.

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