



VIP Durham Regional Police

Men with guns. That's the image. Scary to some. Cool to others. And neither to Keith Richards, diversity coordinator with Durham Regional Police Service.

"Our goal has always been to reflect the community," he says. "For us to serve the public efficiently, we needed to have that diversity competence."

Although Richards has been with DRPS for close to two decades, he's only been in the diversity position since last year. Before then leadership of the organization's diversity strategy was all over the board. That, says Richards, was the "biggest challenge."

"We had no continuity," he explains. "So it was like spinning the roulette wheel when you needed help or when you required anything from the police, depending on who was working and who wasn't."

Richards got the ball rolling with an internal audit—essential, he believes because, "It's hard to know where you're going to go if you don't know where you are." Participants—and 85% responded—had to identify themselves as to race, gender, country of origin, etc. Richards thinks of himself as a typical example: British-born Canadian citizen with a Trinidadian background.

"As a result of seeing our own reflection," he says, "it allowed us to then tailor our recruiting needs, in terms of what we're trying to attract."

It also allowed DRPS to both change the culture within the organization and extend its community outreach. That's when something amazing happened. When asked what they would like to see as a reflection of their own interest, the response came back: attend the Pride Parade in Toronto.

Not only did DRPS send a cruiser to the parade but Police Chief Mike Ewles also insisted the police car be decaled in a rainbow theme. A bold step. It was the only police service in Canada to do that.

"The message that was conveyed was...it told our members internally, hey, it's okay, we are going to celebrate our differences," Richards says. That payoff for a paramilitary operation traditionally viewed as "very macho" was enormous. "Trying to overcome those barriers is very hard," he adds.

That, of course, isn't the only barrier. Although the population base of Durham Region is 51% women, the ratio of female staff and officers at DRPS stands at 18 to 20%.

"But we want 51%. We'll always have that goal. That'll never change," Richards insists. "I don't know if we'll ever see it, but that'll be a goal that we'll always strive for."

In the meantime Richards is working his hardest to ensure women advance through the organization's ranks. He's fully aware of the unique challenge that female officers face who are covering 12-hour shifts at work and handling most of the domestic duties and child-rearing at home.

"They don't have time to study for the (promotional exam). They're too busy making dinner," he explains. "So while they're making dinner, the male officer, their male counterpart, may be sitting on the coach reading the promotional book."

So Richards devised a one-week promotional course in place of the exam where officers come off the road for the duration of the course.

The territory the 1860 officers with DRPS cover is a huge one: east from Pickering to Bowmanville, north from Lake Ontario to Beaverton. It's one big culturally and ethnically mélange. So having a police force that is both visibly and competently diverse is key and just makes sense.

"It not only improves the level of service but also allows us to serve the public at large," Richards says. "Instead of having one officer and one interpreter go, we can send one person who can speak both languages go. So that other officer that's not now going can do some other detail to serve the public."

So what has Durham Regional Police Service got for all its efforts? Besides an 85% buy-in from its employees and a positive response from segments of the community that would otherwise have nothing to do with the police? How about well-deserved recognition as one of Canada's Top 100 Employers. **DI**