Opinion: Trying to understand race relations

By Garry Bowen

A few *Lake Tahoe News* editions ago, I wrote a memoriam about local Spider Sabich's early World Cup win, then suffering the indignity of being shot to death in Aspen, Colo., under tragic circumstances. As similar episodes keep recurring over and over in this culture, allow me to memorialize another, more professional experience, in light of our more tragic, national week, from about that same time period.

A few months after Spider's win at Heavenly in 1968, I landed a job in Denver as a communications consultant. Within a few months of learning the ropes I was engaged by a project in the emerged city of Lakewood, Colo., as they were the first city in the U.S. to incorporate from scratch with a large population base of over 100,000 people. First time in the U.S. until then and none again since that time – unprecedented.



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The learned importance of that project could shed some needed light on the ongoing and current conflicts between this nation's police departments and at least one of their constituencies, in this case the black citizenry.

I was fortuitous in working with Lakewood, as upon incorporation they were immediately out of both the

jurisdiction of Jefferson County (sheriff) and the Denver Police Department. In short, they had to mobilize their “law & order” before they even had a city government in place. The gentleman that took on that job, whose name was Ronald Lynch, was, at the time president of the International Association of Police Chiefs in Washington, D.C., lobbying on behalf of police departments on this continent (including the U.S., Canada, and Mexico – borders are indeed somewhat irrelevant to their work).

In the course of learning how to develop an innovative communications system, it was very useful to understand their daily activities. Lynch took this position precisely due to the immense challenge of starting from scratch, as Lakewood was to be the first public safety department in this country.

Nothing was off the table, as this was an incredible opportunity to look over the entire field of policing, which Lynch shared with me in the process of communications, and in my work in facilitating the needed tasks of day-to-day activities.

One of the things determined by the creation of one of the first public safety departments in the country was concerning recruitment: Lynch was of the studied opinion that when a department advertised for “law enforcement”, what was attracted were “enforcers”, showcasing a trait that may not end up to be that attractive, as policing is not really about security , but about keeping the citizenry secure, a vastly important distinction given our current unwieldly situations.

The other need-to-know was in the sociologic arena – various studies had concluded that an over-emphasis on patrolling “disadvantaged” neighborhoods (while leaving gated communities to their own devices) was going to be problematic, as the levels of trust would need to be structurally shored-up not to cause undue stresses.

Given the structural inequities in share, in compensation, in treatment, it should be apparent that a proliferation of weapon indulgence should be overall curtailed, but is not.

Weaponry was an issue as part of Lakewood's considerations, as at that time, more than 90 percent of officers had never drawn a weapon, and approximately the same high percentage of those drawn were never fired.

That belies the dignity of most public safety service, as the lack of respect is further eroded, to the increasing detriment of "making people feel secure", while increasingly relying on an errant idea that security is somehow more important. Security is more often associated with the protection of property than with the protection of people; therein lies the problem, especially when you're the wrong color, or live in the wrong area of town.

San Francisco (and other cities as well) has begun to revisit these issues, as it is readily apparent that some in police ranks over these decades have not gotten this message, short-changing the maturity needed to be "firm but fair".

Culturally, added fuel derives from the long-standing and ridiculous rating of our Negro population being characterized in founding documents as "three-fifths" of a person, a rating not extended to the patently immature institutional conduct of not being changed or called-out due to so-called benefits for some that want to keep holding on to ill-advised "tradition".

It has been said that prejudice is the "greatest time-saver" ever invented, as it saves some from having to think at all – as we are where we are as a culture, such thinking can be seen now as soul-searching, provided one is able to put in any thought, or has the soul to search for the better parts of who we all are.

Garry Bowen has more than a 50-year connection to the South Shore, with an immediate past devoted to global

sustainability, on most of its current fronts: green building, energy and water efficiencies, and public health.