

OPP celebrates 50 years of women recruits and successes



50 years ago, women with a passion for policing shattered a glass ceiling when the Ontario Provincial Police welcomed its first female recruit class and, at their Aurora detachment last week, trailblazers came together to celebrate a half-century of excellence.

Today we not only celebrate the achievements of all past and current women in the OPP, but also the history of women and leaders everywhere, said OPP's Nicola Morris. We each have women leaders in our lives who inspire us each day, whether they are a loved one, a colleague, a friend, or maybe even someone we do not know well.

The event brought together what Morris described as an inspiring group of women who have travelled journeys of perseverance, aspiration, leadership and excellence. It not only trained the spotlight on women of policing; it also celebrated trailblazers in the Canadian Armed Forces and the Central York Fire Services.

As a member of the OPP's Commissioner's Command Team, and as a police officer, and as a woman, I am proud of the Women in Uniform members who serve in the OPP today and who have served over the past 50 years in all ranks and positions. We have come such a long way over the past five decades, said OPP Acting Deputy Commissioner Karen Meyer, noting women are now fully integrated into all uniform roles across the Province. This is truly an incredible accomplishment and a complete shift in our culture.

Meyer currently leads OPP Corporate Services and said with each new class that comes through, she sees a talented group who will contribute to public safety, serve with excellence, and help change lives in our communities.

When I began my career many, many years ago there was a lot of pressure to conform to being one of the guys, one of the boys. There were very few women constables; there was often only myself as the one woman on platoon. There were very few women in leadership or even senior leadership roles, and there were very few women to look up to as mentors. The culture of policing was very male-dominated. Fast forward, we know things have improved, we know things are better. Women are regarded as equal partners. The policing culture has evolved into one where women are welcomed and respected.

A self-described tomboy while growing up, Police Constable Elizabeth Newton, who serves the OPP in the Protective Services Unit, assigned to Ontario Lieutenant-Governor Edith Dumont, the King's representative in the Province, said she considered herself one of the guys when she began her career.

I was once asked what challenges I faced over the years, said Newton. I almost felt insulted by the question because I never really thought about it, because I am one of the guys that's how I perceived myself, that it made no difference to me. Then I had a lot of

time to think about it and I would say that truthfully, to me and my experiences, the more challenging and difficult times that I have had in my career have been with other women.

?I don't know why that is and I'll probably never figure it out, but my advice to everybody would be to be kind and bring other women up with you; help them, it's our job to mentor those who are coming behind us. That is our responsibility and we need to take it seriously.?

Powerful messages were also delivered by Inspector Jennifer Neatz, Central York Fire Services Captain Tamara Roitman, Military Medic Captain Shannon Tyrrell (Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada), Noa Oirik, a previous OPP Youth in Policing Initiative Student, and Canine Officer Melissa Pirie with Tytan. Live music was offered by students from Richmond Hill's Alexander Mackenzie High School.

Meyer is now one of two Deputy Commissioners within the OPP, serving as members of the Commissioner's Command Team, which ?makes decisions affecting police services across the Province on a daily basis.?

?The OPP now has female members serving in roles where only a few decades ago it would be unthinkable to appoint anyone other than a male officer. For today's uniformed members, having women serving in every role is the norm, not the exception. We have truly come a long way. While we have made amazing strides, it's still critical that we continue to expand diversity in our workforce?. Our community needs to see itself reflected in its police department.

?Thanks to the bravery of those first pioneering women? and to those who serve today. In the decades since, women today can look forward to a successful policing career in which no doors are closed to them.?

By Brock Weir