

YRP celebrates 50 years of women in policing



International Women's Day event marked important milestone

Women in policing shouldn't have to apologize for their unique needs as women; instead, they deserve a workplace where they can be their authentic selves without fear of being judged and ridiculed.

That was a message delivered to current and upcoming women in policing by retired York Regional Police (YRP) Superintendent this month at an International Women's Day event held in Richmond Hill celebrating the 50th anniversary of women in the YRP.

Noakes, who served with the York Regional Police, for more than 32 years, was a keynote speaker at the event, which was both celebratory and reflective.

She began her journey in policing in 1985 and recounted her long, and at some points, unlikely, journey to the YRP, from a marathon race to get to her first interview without a car, to one of the first times she was out on patrol with a mentor when an unexpected call led to her standing in the middle of the intersection in her 'civvies' directing traffic.

'What I remember is the camaraderie and teamwork in every area that I worked in,' she said. 'I was welcomed for the most part. Throughout my career I had the opportunity to serve in all of our York Region communities and worked in a variety of areas throughout the organization. I had many impactful leaders [who] provided strong guidance and mentoring, they cared about their people' and they were clear in their expectations and they recognized my potential and let me know what they thought I was capable of.'

While she says she would do it all over again in a heartbeat, it wasn't all rosy, however.

She forged 'phenomenal relationships' and 'felt valued' in her role of doing 'meaningful and purposeful work' in 'an honourable and noble profession in a community that trusted us,' she experienced her own challenges.

'Within my first couple of weeks at YRP I was reminded there was no place for women in policing,' she recalled. 'During each of my promotions, I encountered comments to my face to the effect of not being the person they wanted in the position, that some had stepped back and watched and were pleasantly surprised I was able to succeed in a way that they hadn't seen a woman do before, and that a grievance might be filed in relation to my promotions.

'I let them say their piece and I silently committed to the challenge of doing what I have always done: do my best to control what I can control, work hard, continue to care for others, live my values, and never lose myself. Never, never lose yourself. I recognize

that we are here to honour many women who have served with YRP over the last 50 years. I am keenly aware that their memories may not be as fond as most of mine are. They weren't necessarily supported by their leaders as much as I was and may have experienced inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour, been ostracized or not invited to the table.

I can't stay silent. I won't. I feel an enormous obligation to ensure their voices are heard. I see it in the current work that I am doing and I was very much reminded of it. Women in police services, sworn and police professionals, are still getting harmed in the workplace. They are not progressing into leadership roles as we would have expected and there are still too many firsts occurring for women in 2025. To my sisters in law, we do not need to apologize for our unique needs as women, needs that contribute to every one of us flourishing and thriving in the workplace. Everyone deserves a workplace where they can bring their authentic selves without fear of being judged, ridiculed. When you have that, people are moving from surviving to thriving. They are driven by purposeful and meaningful work and working towards achieving their potential, and that results in being able to serve their organization and their communities to the best of their abilities.

Support for fostering just that came from York Regional Police Chief Jim MacSween who said that while the phrase 'diversity, equity and inclusion' has been subject of increased criticism south of the border, 'we're doubling down on all the progress we've made around diversity, equity and inclusion.'

I am thankful that York Regional Police is in a better position now to support women in all branches of the organization and across the frontlines all the way now to the executive office,' he said, after viewing historic photos of women in policing that decorated the venue. 'We have definitely had to have difficult but absolutely necessary conversations about the realities that women face in our profession. Amplifying the voices of women and advocating for solutions that make our workplace a better place to live, work and raise families. Just to know your work is important, it is appreciated, and it needs to continue. That one day 50 years from now, some of the younger people in this room will be able to gather once again and look at the pictures taken today and think of the light-years we have advanced by then.'

By Brock Weir