

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a “compassion story of the month.” This is the twenty-eighth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

Modeling Compassion: A Deserved Honor for Brattleboro’s Extraordinary Police

by The Rev Dr Scott Everett Couper

On behalf of Centre Congregation Church and Compassionate Brattleboro

Last month, during the Youth Climate Strike, Centre Congregational Church hosted non-violent civil disobedience training sponsored by Vermont350 and Extinction Rebellion.

At that training, I was struck by the feelings of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ coming from many of those on the Left about law enforcement, A.K.A. ‘the cops’. I worried that those whom we call on as first responders were almost *de facto* portrayed to be an enemy.

In some communities in our country, where, for example, civil disobedience is not respected and where Black Lives *don’t* Matter, that is often a valid portrayal. Happily, it is not in our town of Brattleboro.

And so, at a recent meeting of the Community Equity Collaborative forum, I rejoiced to hear that the Brattleboro Police Department, led by Police Commissioner Michael Fitzgerald, received one of three New England Association of Police Awards for departments serving communities of fewer than 15,000 residents.

This award is no small thing. There are a lot of communities with populations less than 15,000 in New England. Lots! And Brattleboro’s police force received the award identifying it as ‘top drawer’, outstanding, in community policing!

As judged by the article appearing in *The Brattleboro Reformer* posted on 21 August 2019, this award does not recognize enforcement in terms of arrests, ‘busts’, incidents, charges, fines, or convictions. While such retributive criteria are *quantitatively* necessary, they are not, *qualitatively*, the point of this award nor the basis upon which police departments should primarily be evaluated.

The award demonstrates that our police department, under Fitzgerald’s leadership, is indeed compassionate and most worthy of highlighting in our Compassion Stories.

The key purpose of the award is to encourage ‘*community* policing’. Inherent in such a term is an understanding of reciprocity, of partnership, of cooperation between law enforcement and the community. It is not an ‘*us versus them*’ understanding of law enforcement. Rather it is an ‘*us is them*’ understanding – and hence a disintegration, to the extent possible, of antagonisms, fear, arrogance, force, aggression, and dehumanization which have so often

characterized police action in our country's history. An 'us is them' understanding of human relations is perhaps a key to compassion and, within the context of law enforcement constitutes genuine 'community policing'.

Our Brattleboro police department, in addition to risking their lives to keep us safe, engage in many community activities such as reading to children in schools. (If I were a child in this town, I would be awed by such an experience and I would be far less likely to view the police as a potential enemy). Our police also host community block parties and cookouts. The Brattleboro police are striving to be more ethnically and racially diverse in their workforce. Our police work with Turning Point to better understand addiction and its behavioral manifestations. Our police have very positive relationships and partnerships with Groundworks Collaborative in regards to panhandling and homelessness. There are even 'Coffee with a Cop' events where anyone is invited to chat with officers. I am especially thankful that our men and women in blue volunteer with Big Brothers and Big Sisters. It is this grafting, this fusing, with the community, particularly with young people and the most marginalized in our community that enable the police to demonstrate an 'us is them' ethic in their vocation.

And, how about this? When climate change activists disrupted the Strolling of the Heifers parade in June, Chief Fitzgerald chose not to cite anyone, pointing to the town's recent work with the international Charter for Compassion and Project CARE (Community Approach to Recovery and Engagement) collaborative of area health and human service providers.

I would like, personally, to thank Chief Fitzgerald, for being on-hand with his staff at Centre Congregational Church events to make sure that the community is safe when gathered. For example, this year Centre Church hosted the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Day service, an occasion with the possibility of white supremacist contestation. Our police were there to make people feel welcome and safe.

Centre Church and Compassionate Brattleboro are more than grateful to Police Chief Fitzgerald and his officers for helping to make Brattleboro a safe and genuinely compassionate community.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, PO Box 50, Marlboro, VT 05344. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.