

# Firings create dilemma for Unity forum

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By DANIEL STURM

Except for a burned-down Pakistani grocery store in Eagle, there've been no severe attacks against local minority citizens since Sept. 11. This success in preventing hate crime is due in part to work of the ambitious multicultural group Unity in Community Forum, founded by the city's former director of the Human Relations and Community Services Department, Genice Rhodes-Reed, to promote a no-tolerance policy on ethnic intimidation.

"But now we have an in-house challenge," said Shrikummar Poddar from Citizens for Peace, a group represented within the Unity in Community Forum. The recent dismissal of Rhodes-Reed caused turmoil at the group's meeting on Sunday. Her dismissal raised the question of whether the city will continue its funding of the forum (\$10,000), or will attempt to force Rhodes-Reed to resign as the group's coordinator. Poddar said the Unity Forum couldn't simply continue its partnership with the city "unless they can overcome the widespread impression that they've (the city) acted inappropriately." After a meeting Sunday, Poddar talked to the mayor's executive assistant, David Wiener, in order to arrange a discussion with Mayor David Hollister in July.

Rhodes-Reed made her first public appearance since her May 23 dismissal and spoke openly, although she felt "personally embarrassed about discussing this here." Since Joe Graves Jr.'s dismissal as Hollister's chief of staff in July 2002 after his arrest on drunken-driving charges, Rhodes-Reed said she'd heard whispering in City Hall that she was on a firing list. However, the last time she'd met with the mayor in April, "he told me I was doing a good job." Then out of the blue the mayor's chief of staff, Bob Johnson and City Attorney James Smiertka set up a meeting with her. There she was told that the mayor was dissatisfied with her performance and that she didn't work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. ("That's trumped up, I did a 16-hours-job.") Later she was handed a letter to sign stating she was resigning. "Then I was escorted out of Lansing City

Hall." She received no severance package and her health insurance was terminated.

Citing Martin Luther King Jr. ("Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere") Rhodes-Reed confirmed to the audience Sunday that it was her intention to lead the Unity in Community Forum at least until Sept. 30. "I was selected by you and I wasn't terminated by you." She received strong support from many of the 70 activists who met at MSU Union's Green Room.

"As long as racism continues in the city with the current administration, I will stand up against it," said the Rev. Freddie Thomas, Hollister's former special assistant, who was also fired. Thomas brought about 20 members of his congregation to the forum. Thomas called the way he and Rhodes-Reed, among others, were fired was hostile, humiliating and uncalled-for. "These are modern day racial issues," he said.

Robert Egan, who resigned in protest from his position as chairman of the Human Relations Department's Advisory Board after Rhodes-Reed's dismissal, read names from a list of African-Americans who used to work in high-ranking positions for the city government but were let go. Three of Rhodes-Reed's predecessors - state Rep. Mike Murphy, Yvonne Christopher and Art Walker - were terminated or forced to resign. "The racism we saw with Martin Luther King 30 years ago has changed," Egan said. "What I see in the city government and in the community today is some kind of subtle racism. This is certainly an issue the group needs to respond to as an organization."

Last week another member of the board, Noel Copiaco, resigned under protest. "I am sensing a direction at City Hall that is no longer congruent with what I want to achieve in the community," he wrote in a letter to the mayor. Copiaco is the co-founder of the Michigan Asian Pacific American Association and considered himself to be "faithful supporter" of David Hollister when the mayor still was a state representative, his letter said. It's likely that the entire board will now resign, Amy Hodgkin, another committee member, tells City Pulse.

"I will march down Michigan Avenue to protest against discrimination, but dividing the group is the worst thing we could do," said Hodgkin. Other activists, like Mahmoud Mousa from the Islamic Center, emphasized the importance of the Unity Forum and verbalized rising fears that the political scandal of Genice Rhodes-Reed's dismissal could endanger "the continuity of the group." Since the city played an essential role in dealing with refugees and with other urgent social issues, "we cannot continue our work without the city as a partner." And Vinnie Grewal from the Sikhs of Michigan pointed out that whether Rhodes-Reed was connected with the city administration or not didn't really matter. "The question of money doesn't count at all."

Apparently city officials didn't share this perspective. "We are faced with a restricted budget," Wiener said. If the organization redefined its structure separate from the Human Relations Department, then "it has to be clarified how funding will flow in the future," he said. When Rhodes-Reed was the director, many food, printing and staffing requirements had been processed by the city in addition to the regular funding. Wiener said the city is trying to find "a resolution."

Both Wiener and Johnson evaded the question of whether the city will continue to support the Unity in Community Forum with Rhodes-Reed in a leading position. "We've done more than other cities. We'll have to re-evaluate everything," said Johnson.

None of the city representatives wanted to answer questions regarding the circumstances of Rhodes-Reed and other high-ranking African-American employee dismissals. "If someone feels we are racist, address it to

us," Wiener said. Later he told City Pulse that it was "unfortunate we had a high turnover in this particular office."

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