



Unity Gathering held in Alton after recent police shootings

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - The Alton mayor, the chief of police and several clergy shared the stage with members of the community Friday afternoon.

A Unity Gathering held at **Lincoln-Douglas Square** Friday was hosted as a response to the increased violence in the U.S. two recent killings of black men by police as well as the murders of five police officers in Dallas. It was hosted by event organizer **Sasha Bassett**.

"I really wanted to let people in the community speak about the issues affecting them and bring people together," Bassett said.

During her opening remarks, Bassett challenged the nearly 50 people in attendance to look at themselves honestly and find ways to improve on how they view others around them.

Her remarks were followed by local business owner and **Alton Police Department chaplain, Jason Harrison**. Harrison spoke about how people view the color of his skin affects his daily life.

"I still get nervous when I see police lights behind me," he said. "I know I could make a few calls and take care of most problems, but I still get nervous."

Harrison was followed by **Metro East Unity Fellowship Church Pastor Charles Burton**. Burton said his father was a police officer, and his son is a young black man. He expressed sentiments at the families of officers waiting for their loved one to return safe as well as the families who worry about inherent racism tragically ending the life of their loved one.

"My son works at a country club, and I stay awake every night until he gets home safe," Burton said. "I shouldn't have to feel like that. No one should."

Young community members, **Dene't Anderson and Heather Robinson** spoke on behalf of their experiences as well. Anderson spoke about her experiences with everyday racism and how astonished she was it still exists in 2016. Robinson, who described herself as a community activist called for weekly meetings to discuss the current state of politics in River Bend communities. She advocated for young people to be more involved in local politics.

Alton Mayor Brant Walker spoke about having pride in the community and how Alton works toward continuing to build bridges instead of allowing for larger divides.

Alton Police Chief Jason Simmons spoke about the quality of the **Alton Police** force, saying the tragic killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson and the turmoil following it could have happened in Alton if not for the training of the Alton Police Department. He said further measures will be taken in the future to ensure Alton has a police department it deserves.

The event concluded with Bassett reading the names of victims of police violence as well as police officers killed in the line of duty. Those in attendance wrapped black yarn around their wrists and connected the string to their neighbor, who did the same, forming a human chain. Bassett said the yarn was to remind everyone not only of the tragic deaths of people due to unnecessary violence, but also to remind them of the strings tying them to their community.