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Munger partner spearheads teen-police meetup

By Erin Lee
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It was the first time many of these teens had sat face to face with a police officer. Many officers said the same of the kids.

Over 100 teens had gathered in a Cal State Los Angeles meeting room, joined by officials from the Los Angeles Police Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and the Los Angeles School Police Department.

The event, convened by the YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles on Oct. 27, was the result of nearly two years of planning, spearheaded by Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP partner Mark B. Helm.

Over the past five years, the YMCA has been focusing on four of its locations in the under-resourced communities of Boyle Heights, Crenshaw, Maywood and South Los Angeles, according to Alan Hostrup, the Los Angeles YMCA's president and CEO.

Part of the YMCA's mission is to help strengthen the communities it works in, Hostrup said, and he's always looking for new opportunities and avenues to build relationships and foster dialogue.

One such opportunity came around in October 2016, when Helm, who chairs the Los Angeles YMCA's board, and Hostrup attended a national YMCA conference in San Antonio. Two weeks earlier, a black man, Keith Lamont Scott, had been shot by police in Charlotte, North Carolina, prompting two days of riots.

The head of the Charlotte YMCA spoke at the conference of how the local organization was trying to help promote better relations between the police and the community.

"Mark and I were sitting there, and we said, 'The same thing could happen here in Los Angeles,'" Hostrup said.

Upon their return, they brought the issue to YMCA staff, and wheels started turning. They connected with the police department, sheriff's office and Los Angeles Unified School District police, all of which were extremely receptive to the idea, Helm said.

"We told them what we wanted to do and what we wanted to accomplish, which was really to try to create greater understanding and opening of communication between teenagers and law enforcement," Hostrup said. "They



Emilio Aldea / Daily Journal

From left, Alan Hostrup, Los Angeles YMCA president and CEO; David Ruiz, YMCA law enforcement teen forum participant; and Mark B. Helm, Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP partner and Los Angeles YMCA board chair.

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— Mark B. Helm

said, 'We need this too.'

Though they initially planned to convene local families, they ultimately decided to focus the event on teenagers to allow for open, honest dialogue among the kids, Helm said.

Changes in leadership, however, held up the process. LAPD Chief Michel Moore replaced Chief Charlie Beck in June, and Sheriff Jim McDonnell was tied up with the election, which he ultimately lost to Alex Villanueva.

Two years after Helm and Hostrup attended the national conference, a date was on the calendar.

The law enforcement agencies brought about 35 officers, many of whom were cadets or worked in the local communities.

The event began with a panel that included

Moore, other law enforcement officials and teenagers. The teens asked questions of the panel, including about racial profiling, whether police give support to some neighborhoods compared to others and how much officers believed in their jobs.

"What was powerful was that these were the questions of teenagers," Hostrup said. "To hear law enforcement respond was really great."

From there, participants broke into small groups. Each table had a combination of students, law enforcement, YMCA staff and Days of Dialogue facilitators, who guided the participants through discussion.

Hostrup said at his table, everyone seemed apprehensive at first, leaning back in their seats.

“Lots of these teens had never been that close to a police officer in that kind of way,” he said. “They’re used to being around a police officer when there’s something going wrong or there’s an emergency.”

Over the course of an hour of conversation, however, everyone’s body language changed. The discussion was honest, and slowly smiles emerged and people began moving toward the center of the table. There was a willingness to disagree, he said.

These were real issues for many of the teens, Helm said. One teen Helm spoke to said that one of his friends was killed by police.

During the discussion, a police officer said, “We try to do the best we can, but I think we can do better and we have room to improve,” said Helm, paraphrasing the officer’s comments. The officers’ openness and willingness to listen was encouraging, Helm said.

“My goal was that the more that the police start to see these kids as members of the community ... I think that’s going to be healthy,” he said.

The day of the event, Oct. 27, was the same day as the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting,

which had happened earlier that morning. It undermined the urgency of issues they were discussing and the need for more conversation, Hostrup said.

“One of the teenagers said, ‘Maybe a get-together like this can be a spark that resonates throughout our nation,’” he recalled.

Though the YMCA is often seen as a “swim and gym,” the organization’s name and brand and relationship with members uniquely positions it to help strengthen its local communities, Helm said.

For Helm, leading the YMCA’s board is deeply personal: The YMCA has been part of his life since he was 8, when he joined the Indian Guides program — now called Adventure Guides — with his father. In junior high, he played basketball, flag football and soccer, and in high school, he was a day camp counselor and joined the youth government program.

In 1974, he was elected youth governor of the model legislature in Sacramento, and decades later, he went on to join the program’s board, before becoming chairman of YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles.

“The Y is really a movement,” Helm said. “It’s a national and international movement that has healthy living and healthy lifestyles as part of it, but it’s also about strengthening communities and improving lives and trying to make a difference.”

The Los Angeles YMCA hadn’t had an event with law enforcement before, according to Hostrup, but he hopes to do it again in the future. He plans to work with law enforcement to assign officers to each YMCA location and program site to continue to keep the paths of dialogue open between members and officers. Moore also joined the YMCA’s board as a result of the collaboration.

Partnerships are essential to expanding the YMCA’s reach, Helm said. Hostrup hopes to address other issues in the community, such as homelessness, particularly in Hollywood, where the YMCA will soon be next door to a temporary homeless shelter. But he plans to ask and listen to the teenage YMCA members about potential next steps.

“They give me inspiration and insight into what’s really happening in our communities,” he said.