The View of the Executive Director

2018 marks the 50th year since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) and the 10 year anniversary of the ACRB. This year will also be historically remembered as the year that American tweens and teens rose up in the spirit of the legendary civil rights leader and used their expertise in social media to mobilize the world and offer a fresh perspective. The March for Our Lives drew millions of supporters who took to the streets in a peaceful but forceful global statement against gun violence.

It was organized by the young survivors of the Parkland, Florida school shooting. Locally, some 30,000 rallied and marched from the Center for Civil & Human Rights Museum to the State Capitol, calling for reform in gun control laws to help put an end to senseless gun violence. One of the keynote speakers at the Washington, DC rally was 9 year old Yolanda Renee King, the granddaughter of MLK who lost his life to gun violence. The poised youngster used the moment before hundreds of thousands of citizens in DC and millions worldwide to say simply “Enough is enough!” Mass rallies and marches can be a very powerful force. But it is not enough.

To their credit, the independent youth organizers have capitalized on the moment by warning elected officials that soon many of them will be old enough to vote them out of office unless they support meaningful gun control legislation. Their website is devoted to voter registration. They realize that voting or not voting has generational effects and current impacts. It is the gateway to electing those who will support reasonable gun control. It emboldens them to stand against big money lobbies. It makes them courageous to hold law enforcement accountable for its actions. Officer selection, training, integrity and, lest we forget, the jury pools are also determined by the vote.

New voices offering different perspectives benefit our citizens. Such has been the case recently with the ACRB. It is exciting to see new faces and changes in leadership positions on the Board as it prepares for its second decade of service.

ACRB Welcomes New Members and Fresh Perspectives to the Board
Significant changes are underway at the ACRB. There are a number of new faces offering new perspectives and expressing a passion to review cases of alleged misconduct by local law enforcement. And for the first time in recent years, all three seats on the Atlanta Citizen Review Board that represent all 25 Neighborhood Planning Units (NPUs) in the City of Atlanta have been occupied. Residents living in NPU locations are being represented on the ACRB by highly skilled and qualified citizens who have an extensive record of service and achievement within those communities and far beyond.

Paul Bartels surprised everyone by announcing his decision to step down in 2018. Bartels, one of the longest-serving members of the current Board, was appointed by the Atlanta Bar Association and sworn in as a member of the Board on December 9, 2010. A criminal defense attorney, Mr. Bartels indicated a desire to leave and allow others an opportunity to serve on the ACRB as he pursues other interests. Mr. Bartels is the only Board member ever to serve as Chair, Vice Chair and Secretary. He was acknowledged for his thoughtful and incisive opinions based on his extensive legal knowledge.

Weeks later, Board Member Sherry Williams chose to remain on the Board but not to run for a second term as Board Chair. She said she had always made it clear that she also wanted to give others a chance to assume the mantle of leadership. Ms. Williams was appointed by the Atlanta Planning Advisory Board (APAB) to the ACRB to represent Neighborhood Planning Units (NPUs) G-L.

Board Member M. Gino Brogdon from the Gate City Bar Association was voted as her replacement. The Board’s first Millennial leader vowed to generate more exposure to the Board. “The Board is doing some incredible things,” Brogdon said after presiding over his first Board meeting as Chair. “... If we can get more exposure, get more people interested in what we’re doing here, because there is clearly a need for it. The work is being done. We got to get people to see it. We’re going to fill up these seats. We’re going to get this Board going.”

Gloria Hawkins-Wynn was appointed to the ACRB by the Atlanta City Council. She was sworn into office on February 19, 2018 by the Atlanta Municipal Clerk Rhonda Dauphin-Johnson.

Ms. Hawkins-Wynn has been in Atlanta for more than 40 years. She is a licensed attorney and a member of the State Bar of Georgia since 1996. Much of her legal experience has been derived from the Judge Advocate General’s Corps, also known as the JAG Corps, the legal branch or specialty of the U.S. military, concerned with military justice and military law, where she began as a paralegal in the early eighties and retired in 2005. Ms. Hawkins-Wynn has also been a servant-leader in her Lakewood Heights community as Vice Chair of the Lakewood Heights Civic Association and a Board member of her local branch of the YMCA. As she waited to be sworn in by Municipal Clerk Rhonda Dauphin-Johnson, Ms. Hawkins-Wynn said “It’s a pleasure to be able to sit on a city Board whereby it’s an opportunity to look at some of the issues that are confronting both our community and our professional police officers, and acting as a go-between, addressing issues and concerns that are very important to the community, particularly in this heightened period of community/police relations. We want to set a tone whereby all that are at the table feel that they can be heard and that they are heard, in search of a community and policing that will lift the people up…”

Barbara Ward-Groves was appointed by APAB to the ACRB to represent NPUs M-R.

Ward-Groves started her career with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) Atlanta District office as an investigator working in conjunction with senior investigators that documented some of the first major problems with the Red Cross. She would later go on to assume positions as the District Public Affairs Specialist (Executive Producer of the FDA Focus television program), Regional AIDS Coordinator (co-founder of the Georgia AIDS Information Network), and Regional Industry and Small Business Representative. Ward-Groves also briefly served as a training officer before being selected as Health Scientist Administrator for the Office of International Programs (OIP), Office of the Commissioner, where she served as Associate Director of Europe (Foods), Associate Director for the Americas, and Associate Director for the International Planning and Resource Management staff. She was involved in multilateral and bilateral international activities and was part of a team responsible for negotiating and finalizing some of the agency’s first confidentiality commitments with international counterparts. She represented FDA and the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) on international trade missions.

Ward-Groves has received numerous recognition awards, and citations. She retired as Special Assistant to the Southeast Region Food and Drug Director and promptly set out to fulfill a post-retirement goal.

“I told people years ago that if I ever retired, that I would seek a position on the Atlanta Citizen Review Board,” Ms. Ward-Groves said. “So it’s not like somebody asked me to be on the Board. I really politicized for the Board. because it’s something I really wanted to do...”
Your Story: “When I think of ACRB…”

“(The investigator) really did her job and beyond.”

Derese Alexander was on the top floor of her three story Atlanta home near her three young children when she heard a commotion downstairs. She discovered that her sister’s boyfriend had forced his way inside through a sliding door and pulled a gun on one of her two visitors. They ran upstairs and he followed, brandishing the pistol and asking Alexander whether he should put them out. She responded that he was not supposed to be in her house, then dialed 9-1-1 as he returned to the ground floor. Alexander was not sure whether her sister’s boyfriend had fled the scene, but it bothered her more that “It took the police more than an hour to even show up when they did decide to come. …Two officers pulled up. And the one officer I really had the problem with, it was just like he thought that everything was funny, like this was a big joke to him.”

Alexander explained to Special Police Officer (SPO) Patrick Witter that she is a single mother, trying to calm down her terrorized kids. Ms. Alexander told him that at no point did she find the incident funny. She said what made matters worse was that “…he really didn’t do anything. He didn’t check my house to see if the guy was gone.”

The police response only added to her discomfort. “As a taxpayer, we’re paying police’s salary to protect us...we couldn’t even get nothing.”

Outside her home, Ms. Alexander continued her conversation with SPO Witter. “I told him if I have to buy me a gun and protect me and my kids, then that’s what I’m going do. And I told him, I said, you know, most people wouldn’t want to have to shoot and kill somebody, but I’m not going to risk my life and my kids’ life because you guys don’t want to do anything...He (Officer Witter) just kept laughing like it was funny to him.”

Dissatisfied by the police response, within days of the incident, Ms. Alexander decided learn the simple steps to take to file a formal complaint with the ACRB. “I went on the website (www.acrbgov.org) and filed my complaint. After I spoke to an investigator, I had to go down and...do my statement. She stayed in contact the whole time while she was doing her investigation...She really did her job and beyond.”

The complaint filed by Ms. Alexander alleged that SPO Witter “...failed to conduct an adequate investigation, failed to complete an incident report and laughed at her when she expressed concern for her safety when he responded to her residence in response to her 9-1-1 call.”

The Board agreed with the staff recommendation and voted to sustain an Appropriate Action Required and a Conduct allegation against SPO Witter. It recommended that the officer receives a Written Reprimand and Training as it relates to stalking, protective-orders and courtesy policies.

The Board also strongly urged the Atlanta Police Department (APD) to make the training available, if not mandatory, for all its officers.

APD’s Office of Professional Standards essentially agreed with the Board. It also determined in favor of Ms. Alexander that “the officer’s actions were outside department policy as it related to Ms. Alexander’s call for service.”

The police department’s internal investigation resulted in a finding of Sustained with regard to the allegation “APD Work Rule 4.1.1 Appropriate Action against SPO Patrick Witter.” Additionally, the investigation produced sufficient facts to support the allegation of “APD Work Rule 4.2.03 Responsibilities of Supervisor, producing a decision of Sustained against Witter’s supervisor, Sgt. Eric Teague.”

“She (the investigator) did say that he was found in the wrong. I received a letter in the mail (from ACRB), but it really didn’t specify what exactly was going to happen to him or what did happen. I felt like he could have even apologized.”

So far, Derese Alexander says that she has not heard anything from the APD.
KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AND BE HEARD!

The keyword in the Atlanta Citizen Review Board is **CITIZEN**. The agency is only as effective as the level of Citizen involvement. This is why ACRB urges all Citizens to regularly monitor, question and support its work. This is why ACRB urges all Citizens to know where your elected officials stand on civilian oversight of police and corrections. This is why it is so important for Citizens to be registered and vote. This is why Citizens need to join and be active in community groups. Get involved in Neighborhood Planning Units (NPUs). Attend Public Safety meetings, Atlanta City Council meetings and KNOW YOUR RIGHTS TRAINING WORKSHOPS. Become a member of the ACRB Board. Currently there are three vacancies. Contact ACRB for details. Fill the chambers to capacity when Council votes to fund issues that matter to Citizens like you. Thank you, Citizens of Atlanta, for your continued support.

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March for Our Lives Draws 30,000 in Atlanta Against Gun Violence

An estimated 30,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Atlanta in a show of solidarity for the young survivors of the Parkland, Florida school shooting. Affected by a shared tragedy and armed with nothing more than their cellphones and knowledge of social media, the survivors of the school shooting that killed 17 students and faculty organized and rallied millions of supporters in what they described as a March for Our Lives. They sparked 800 anti-gun violence events worldwide. Locally, they marched from the Center for Civil & Human Rights Museum to the State Capitol, calling for an end to senseless gun violence.

The Florida students have lobbied Congress and managed to help pass a significant gun control bill in Florida. Denouncing the National Rifle Association’s influence on federal gun legislation by elected officials, an impassioned Congressman John Lewis told the Atlanta crowd, “I want to thank each and every one of you...for standing up! We must never give up, never give in...Young people, you gonna be 18, get out there and get registered and vote like you’ve never ever voted before. The vote is precious. The vote is the most powerful instrument or tool we have in a democratic society and we must use it.”

One of the keynote speakers at the Washington, DC rally was 11 year old Naomi Wadler who said that she was there on behalf of the African-American girls whose stories don’t make the headlines in newspapers or on the evening news. “My friends and I might still be 11, and we might still be in elementary school, but we know. We know life isn’t equal for everyone, and we know what is right and wrong. We also know that we stand in the shadow of the Capitol and we know that we have seven short years until we, too, have the right to vote,” Wadler said.