

Renteria panel says changes are needed

By Brian Sharp
Senior Reporter

The Lincoln Police Department has spent years building bridges between itself and minority groups, Police Chief Tom Casady said. Now, he said, those bridges are being burned.

But during a panel discussion on Tuesday at Nebraska Wesleyan University, members of Lincoln's Hispanic community said there weren't enough bridges to begin with.

The panel was called to discuss police involvement in the Francisco Renteria case.

After a confrontation on Sept. 30 with six UNL and Lincoln police officers, Renteria had a seizure and went into a coma. He died Oct. 1.

Questions have been raised since then about the way police treat Hispanics and other minorities. The department and the community must deal with those questions before they can heal their relationship, Casady said.

Prejudice, Casady said, is a part of society. Police officers are a product of that society, he said.

"This is not just a problem for police," he said. "Most people in Lincoln don't see that (racism), and they have a hard time believing that it happens."

The panel included Casady; Coleen Seng, a member of the city council; Ed Wimes, assistant to Lincoln Mayor Mike Johanns; Cecilia Huerta, interim executive director of the Mexican American Committee; Carlos Monzon, the Renteria family's lawyer; Jose Soto, who has served as interpreter for the family; and Col. Ron Tussing of the Nebraska State Patrol.

Wimes said that mending divisions in the community was everyone's responsibility, and it was a responsibility with great consequences.

"It's going to take time for the wounds to heal," Wimes said. "Maybe some of them never will."

"We cannot bring Mr. Renteria back. But to continue to have division because our hearts, our souls, our minds cannot move forward is a greater tragedy yet."

Monzon agreed the issue involved everyone but said moving forward required taking some big steps.

He said Casady had "done a lot of good

"It's going to take time for the wounds to heal. Maybe some of them never will."

ED WIMES

assistant to the mayor

things, but sometimes good intentions are not enough." The steps taken so far were too small, he said.

Monzon said Tussing had a conflict of interest in investigating the case. When Tussing was Lancaster County sheriff, he asked Casady to be his chief deputy. A separate investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice is needed, Monzon said. Late Wednesday, U.S. Attorney Tom Monaghan initiated a federal investigation into the incident.

Tussing said that he and Casady still were friends and that some investigators were related to police officers. But that relationship wouldn't affect the investigation, he said.

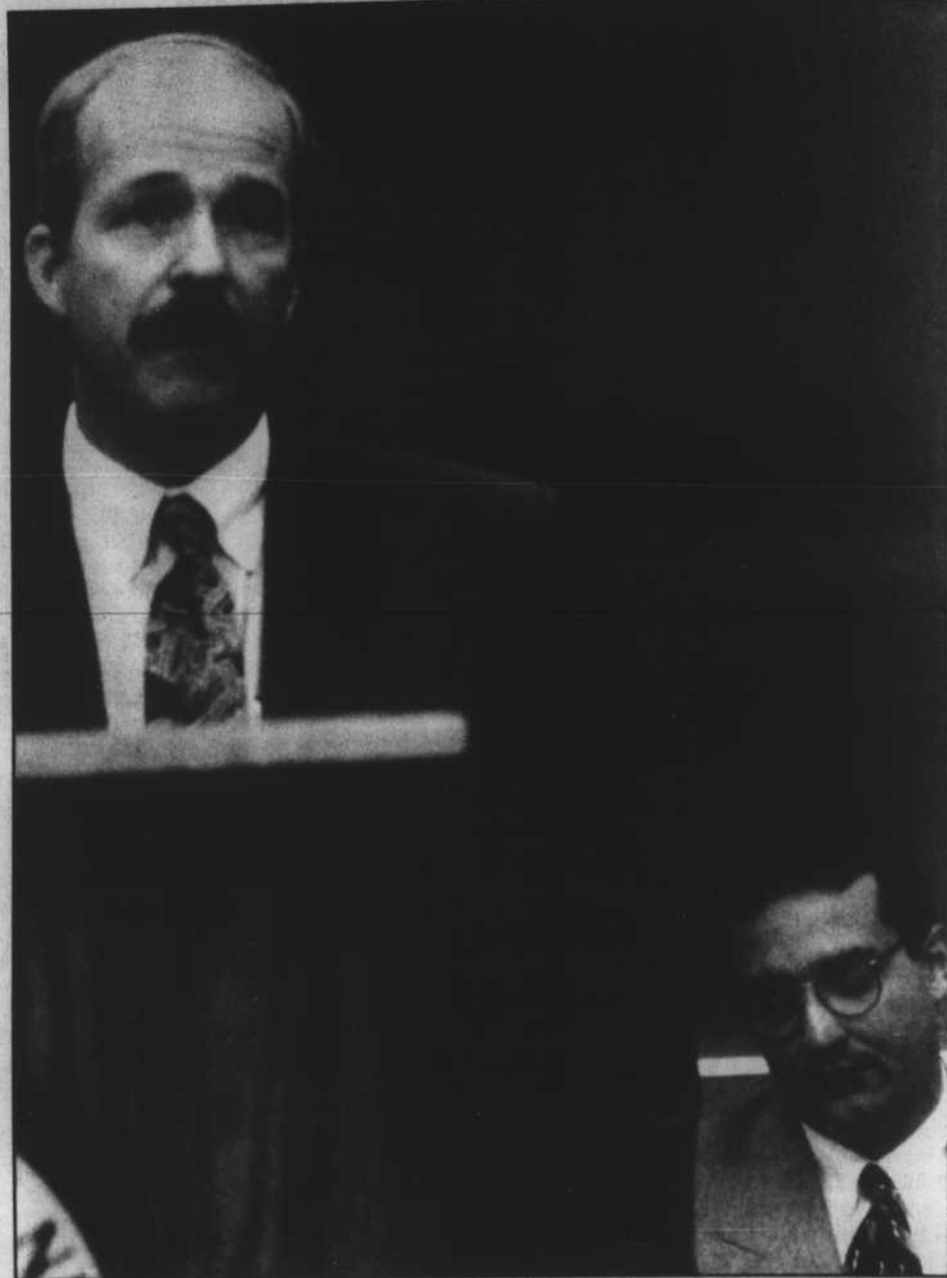
The investigation is a no-win situation for the state patrol, Tussing said. Whether or not the grand jury indicts police officers, parties involved in the case will blame the state patrol for presenting biased evidence.

Seng and other panelists called for the release of the results of the autopsy and investigation. People then could discuss the facts, she said, instead of the rumors.

Soto agreed and said the investigation into police procedure could go only so far. A large part of what happened the night of Renteria's death was based on the officers' discretion in deciding what constituted resisting arrest or reasonable force.

Following the discussion, Casady declined to comment on the officers' histories or whether any prior complaints had been filed against them.

Tussing said the state patrol had not interviewed the officers involved. Investigators are gathering other information first so they can



Jay Calderon/DN

Carlos Monzon, the lawyer for the Renteria family, looks on as Lincoln Police Chief Tom Casady talks during a panel discussion about the events surrounding the death of Francisco Renteria.

ask better questions, he said.

Meanwhile, the Hispanic community is beginning to deal with emotions that the case has stirred, Huerta said. People are channeling their feelings into change, she said, instead of anger.

And Seng said the police department and community needed to change a lot to understand different cultures better.

"We've been at this a long time," she said. "But we have not reached peak performance yet. We have failed somewhere."

Callers, cops discuss crime

Training, diversity focus of radio show

By Paula Lavigne
Senior Reporter

Lincoln community members questioned police during a call-in radio show on Wednesday about how officers handle cultural diversity.

"To the Best of My Knowledge," a biweekly program on KFOR-AM with host University of Nebraska-Lincoln Chancellor Graham Spanier, featured UNL Police Chief Ken Cauble and Rex Rakow, director of security and police at the University of Notre Dame.

Spanier said the show would focus on national trends in campus crime, but the majority of callers discussed the death of Francisco Renteria and the jurisdiction of UNL police officers.

Renteria, 29, went into a coma and died after a Sept. 30 struggle with UNL and Lincoln police.

Cauble wouldn't discuss specifics of the investigation during the show, but he said the UNL Police Department, the Lincoln Police Department and the Nebraska State Patrol still were investigating the incident.

Callers raised questions about police language training and diversity in the UNL police department.

"Every citizen, whether they do speak what we call our native language, should have the right to be safe when they're out in their community," Cauble said.

Cauble said that for the past five years, the trend among police had been to use more bilingual officers and to provide officers with training in different languages.

"In the university, we have people from al-

most every country, so there's a lot of languages to cover," he said.

Cauble said he was not fluent in any foreign language. He said the 29-member university police force had no Hispanic officers but had two officers with conversational Spanish skills. The department also has two African Americans and two Native Americans.

"We have been trying for several years to diversify more through culture and diversity rather than just gender," Cauble said. "It is sometimes difficult. There are a lot of drawbacks to recruitment for different diverse groups."

Cauble said minority groups might encounter difficulties when the department commissions officers. He said he was trying to help minority applicants meet the department's standards.

Rakow said the crime problems in Lincoln reflected a growing nationwide trend. Rakow is the former president of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators.

Rakow also addressed questions about cultural diversity. His current jurisdiction, the University of Notre Dame, is composed of students from 50 states and more than 100 countries.

"Most universities and colleges are very diverse communities," he said. "The university police officer may very well be more equipped or have more experience dealing with culturally different people, and that's going to continue."

Universities of UNL's size have taken on responsibilities of complex cities, Rakow said.

"University police officers should be trained and trusted as municipal officers are," he said. "Sometimes you'll find university police officers are trained to a greater extent than municipal officers."

Police have no firm suspects, Cauble said, and the time lapse will make the case more difficult to solve.

"The sooner we know about an offense, the better it is," Cauble said. "There is a lack of physical evidence that is needed to prosecute. It gets down to one person's story against another person's story."

A first-degree sexual assault is a Class II felony that carries a maximum 50-year prison sentence and a minimum of one year in jail.

Assault

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room, but she requested a protection order against that man for when she was outside her room.

UNL Police Chief Ken Cauble said on Wednesday that his office had not been notified of a protection order filed in Lancaster County Court.

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