

# COMMUNITY

Your weekly hometown news section

SECTION G

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## Panel works toward harmony

**THE COUNTY HUMAN  
RELATIONS  
COMMISSION  
PROMOTES  
UNDERSTANDING  
AND TOLERANCE  
AMONG DIVERSE  
GROUPS**

By **TRAVIS R. MOORE**  
STAFF WRITER

**A** fight that arose between a black boy and a white boy in an Allentown school in 1992 spread onto local streets. The intervention of the Monmouth County Human Relations Commission kept it from escalating further.

An investigation showed the issue wasn't a racial one, as people had assumed.

"It was more of a personality conflict — just two kids who didn't like each other and got into a fight," said David Cohen, the commission's

chairman emeritus.

"It could have been two black kids or two white kids," he said. "It just happened to be mixed."

Once the commission's investigation brought the facts to light, the situation was defused.

For nearly six years, the commission, the first of its kind in the state, has worked to promote understanding and tolerance among the many cultural groups throughout Monmouth County and around the state.

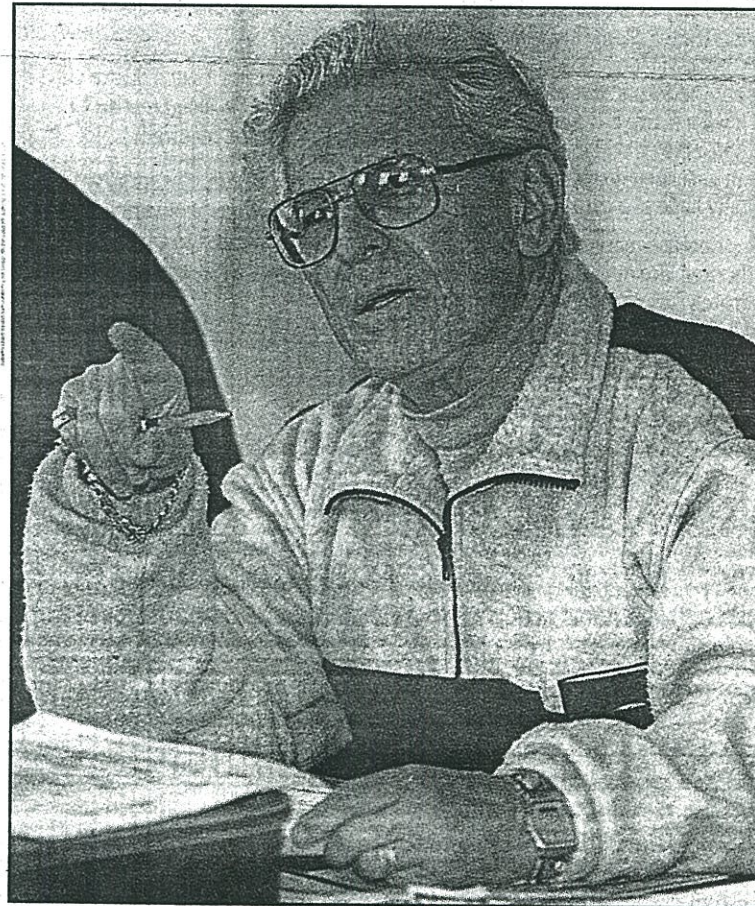
Its mission is to bring together county leaders in the government, law enforcement, clergy, community, corporate and education sectors to enhance human relations and address issues of diversity.

Over the years, the commission has led town meetings, participated

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MARK R. SULLIVAN/Staff Photographer

● Holmdel Township's David Cohen is a Monmouth County Human Relations Commission member.



# Harmony

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in school workshops, supported sensitivity training for law enforcement and established a police-community task force. It also has prepared and distributed a resource directory to all school systems, formulated an employment discrimination directory, created a minority bias booklet and established a 24-hour bias hot line, (908) 303-7666.

The hot line, established in 1991, operates from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday through the county Department of Human Services. After hours, callers may leave messages on an answering machine, according to Ray Rodriguez, chairperson of the commission's Incident Response and Reporting Support Team.

"Generally, the hot line serves as a referral service and an advocate for county citizens who perhaps may be frustrated by situations," said Rodriguez of Howell Township. "Let's say a person is misplaced or fired from their employment and they feel it was based on their race, ethnicity, religion or has some other discriminatory overtones, we take down the details in a report."

Copies of the report are then distributed to Rodriguez and the commission's Chairperson Uma Ramakrishna, of Howell Township.

"We review it and determine how to handle it," Rodriguez said. "Should there be some criminal overtones, we send it to the county prosecutor's office which determines whether there was sufficient criminal activity to take further action."

The hot line has helped track the number of bias incidents and bias crimes committed in the county each year. The number of bias crimes committed county-wide peaked in 1992 at 159 and has decreased significantly each year thereafter, dropping from 129 in 1994 to 88 in 1995, according to a report issued this month by Detective Louis Jordan of the Monmouth

County prosecutor's office bias crime unit.

"For the third straight year, we have seen the number of bias crimes decline in Monmouth County," said Robert Honecker of Tinton Falls, second assistant county prosecutor. "I think that's a very good sign because it shows that the Human Relations Commission's programs are working."

Since its inception, the commission, has helped 12 of the state's 21 counties establish their own commissions. It has assisted 18 of the 53 municipalities throughout the county in starting their own.

"Frankly, we feel it's very important for every county and town in the state to have a commission," Cohen said. "We recognize that most people feel more comfortable discussing their problems with people they know and we want to enable people to solve problems on their own."

In Holmdel Township, where Cohen lives, the township's commission has made strides.

"We had a neighborhood problem once between people of different religions," Cohen said.

"We had a Hindu man and there is no Hindu temple in our area so he used his house to hold religious services. Because of that, there would be an accumulation of cars on the street where he lived and the neighbors didn't like those cars there. It got a little nasty and the neighbors called the police, did damage to some of the cars and we got the call."

Instead of getting directly involved, Cohen asked the township's human relations commission to handle it.

"They succeeded locally by bringing everyone together to talk it out," he said. "Now every time I see the contestants I ask them how things are going and they say everything is fine."

On a broader scale, the county commission led the way in bringing national, state and local law enforcement officials together in 1992 to determine the cause of problems stemming from large groups congregating in Belmar,

particularly for the annual gathering of black college fraternities and sororities along the boardwalk.

They brought in the United States Department of Justice, the New Jersey Attorney General, the chiefs of police, the state police and Belmar's municipal officials, Cohen said.

"We had a meeting in Asbury Park and out of that came a system that Belmar has been using for the past several years and, as you've noticed, there hasn't been the same kind of problem again."

The system, based on advice from Rep. Thomas Smith, R-N.J., suggests a police department reflect the demographics of its community, be well-trained in traffic and crowd control, maintain a non-confrontational presence and encourage regular dialogue between police and the community, Cohen said.

Middletown Police Chief William Fowlie, chairperson of the commission's Police-Community Relations Core Team, said the county chiefs association recognizes the importance of the commission and is committed to improving police and community relations throughout the county.

"As police chiefs, we all know that the more cooperation we get from the public the better we will be able to do our job," said Fowlie. "If we can limit prejudice and stop some of the hate crimes, it makes our job easier in the long run. We are committed to helping promote understanding and tolerance between various sections of the community."

The commission was formed in February 1990 when the Monmouth County prosecutor's office and the Monmouth-Ocean Chapter of National Conference of Christians and Jews invited 25 community leaders to a meeting.

"As a result, they asked for volunteers from various organizations and 12 of us volunteered," Cohen said. "At that time, we met almost weekly trying to determine what we were, what we could do and how we were going to do it."

At Freeholder Theodore Narozza-