

## They made history in skirts, heels

City's first female police officers will talk about their careers and experiences as part of museum exhibit.

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Gail Sloan and Annie Gillespie knew they were taking risks.

It was the late 1960s in Charlotte, a place and time when women were still expected to tend house and the children. Few women dared to try to do the jobs of men. Fewer still entertained thoughts of becoming police officers.

But Sloan, now 65, and Gillespie, 64, did it. Nearly 20 years after her training, Sloan retired from the then-Charlotte Police Department as a captain. Gillespie, the department's first black female officer, didn't last quite as long, leaving Charlotte for South Florida after seven years.

But the two, along with fellow female cop pioneers Mickey Casey and Cheryl Horner, still get together every year or so to enjoy each other's company and relive some of their memories.

They'll get another chance Thursday, when Sloan, Gillespie, Casey and Horner will help lead a Community Dialogue session at the Charlotte Museum of History, which is hosting the yearlong exhibit: "Beneath the Badge: Policing in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County."

The exhibit, which opened last month and will run through the end of the 2010-11 school year, features artifacts, photographs and information about the history of policing in the county. The museum hosts occasional Community Dialogue sessions, and officials thought the women would be an ideal subject in conjunction with the exhibit.

"It's not just for people interested in history," said museum spokeswoman Christy Williams. "It's for people interested in police work and crime, and I think it's important for people to understand where the police have come from and where they want to be."

Today, a little more than 13 percent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department's 1,723 sworn officers are women. Like so many institutions, the Charlotte and Mecklenburg County police departments - the two merged in 1993 - have a history of discrimination against them. Sloan, Gillespie, Casey and Horner endured their share of condescension and harassment from male officers who thought the police department was no place for a woman.

"You had to have a very strong constitution, a strong will," Gillespie said. "You also had to have an understanding that even though these individuals did not like you, you still had a job to do and do well. "I refused to stoop to their level. I learned a long time ago - I was told - that you don't sink to other people's level, you let them rise to yours. That's exactly what I did."

Gillespie, a Charlotte native who in 1968 was a social sciences student at what is now N.C. Central University, thought she wanted to become a lawyer. But she jumped at the chance to become a police officer. Even then, she said, she wanted to find a way to show young African Americans that they didn't have to accept lives of poverty and crime.

"I saw a need, and I thought it was a risk I absolutely could not afford not to take," she said. "It was just something I chose to do on my own."

She began working in the department's Youth Bureau, a division that mainly handled juvenile cases. Then-Chief John Ingersoll thought women might be able to talk with young people in a way men couldn't, so Sloan and Gillespie went to the Youth Bureau after graduating from the academy.

At the time, the Charlotte Police Department employed 21 other black officers, all men. Gillespie said they didn't give her any trouble. The white men were a different story. "They didn't embrace any of the four of us, I'll leave it at that," she said.

She left for Florida with her husband after seven years, working as head of police for the school system in Broward County. She's been retired since 2000, splitting time between Florida and a second home in Harrisburg. She remains active, though, volunteering to mentor students at West Mecklenburg High School when she's in town.

"I still believe," Gillespie said, "we have a responsibility to work with young people and parents and provide opportunities for them."

Sloan preceded Gillespie by a year. The Iredell County native had graduated from East Carolina University with a psychology degree, but Sloan said she wanted to work outdoors. In 1967, she read something in the newspaper about Chief Ingersoll wanting female police officers.

"I went down to the department and signed up," she said. Over the years, she moved from the Youth Bureau to patrol, eventually rising in 1984 to the captain's position she retired from two years later.

Before she earned her bars, though, Sloan took some grief. One of her strongest memories is of a midnight shift in 1972 or 1973, when she pulled in to a Central Avenue restaurant for breakfast at about 3 a.m., during a driving rainstorm.

They hadn't even brought the food when her sergeant walked in and told her she had a flat tire. Go change it, he told her. She did. In the rain. It was a big, heavy tire, too.

To this day, Sloan suspects the sergeant let the air out of her tire on purpose. She hadn't noticed anything wrong when she pulled up.

But revenge was hers. Sloan later supervised the sergeant. "I never let the air out of his tires," she said. By then, there was no need. She'd made her point by doing her job. "Charlotte was a little behind the times then," she said. "I think they tried us in recruit school to see if we could do it, and we did it. And women are still doing it."