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MEDIA RELEASE / COMMUNITY ALERT

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San Mateo Police Officers Reflect on Civil Rights Journey with Renewed Commitment to Justice: Insights from Key Historical Sites and Open Conversations on Advancing Social Equality

San Mateo Police Department, alongside Bay Area law enforcement and community members, retraced the steps of the Civil Rights Movement, visiting historic sites and engaging in powerful discussions about justice, equality, and the ongoing fight against racism. The journey fostered a deeper understanding and a commitment to bring meaningful change to the community.

San Mateo, CA – Members of the San Mateo Police Department, alongside Bay Area law enforcement and community partners, have experienced a deeply transformative journey retracing the steps of the Freedom Riders with the Sojourn Project. This impactful experience took participants through key cities of the Civil Rights Movement—Montgomery, AL; Birmingham, AL; Hattiesburg, MS; and Memphis, TN—where they encountered history firsthand and came away with a renewed commitment to advancing social justice.

The trip provided participants with invaluable insights into the triumphs and tragedies of the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the journey, they were reminded of the courage of ordinary people who stood against extraordinary injustice.

In **Montgomery, Alabama**, participants visited the Civil Rights Memorial Center, Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, Rosa Parks Museum, National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the Freedom Rides Museum. They spent hours at the Legacy Museum, deeply immersed in the history of slavery and lynching. Two exhibits left a lasting impact: the Atlantic Ocean burial site, symbolizing the countless African lives lost during the Middle Passage, and the lynching exhibit, commemorating those who were murdered in acts of racial terror.

"*This journey was an eye-opening and deeply humbling experience for all of us*," said San Mateo Police Chief Ed Barberini. "*Walking through the history of the Civil Rights Movement and witnessing the profound suffering endured by so many reminded us of the responsibility we carry as law enforcement. We are more committed than ever to ensuring that justice and equality are at the heart of everything we do in service to our community*."

During the entirety of these trips, the group reflected on the six principles of nonviolence taught by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., including the belief that "suffering can educate and transform" and that

"nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people." These teachings resonated throughout their journeys.

They also had the privilege of spending the day with one of the Little Rock Nine, who courageously integrated Central High School in Arkansas. Her personal account of the intense opposition and racism she faced was both heartbreaking and inspiring.

In **Birmingham, Alabama**, participants visited Kelly Ingram Park and the 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of the 1963 bombing that tragically took the lives of four young girls: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair. The group had the profound opportunity to speak with the sister of Denise McNair and the fifth girl in the church that day who survived the bombing.

While in Birmingham, the group also spent time reflecting on the bravery of civil rights leaders, like Fred Shuttlesworth, whose courage in the face of brutal violence inspired generations of activists. At Kelly Ingram Park, they learned about the violent response from law enforcement to peaceful civil rights marches and how children were arrested for demanding equal rights.

In **Hattiesburg, Mississippi**, the participants connected deeply with the legacy of Vernon Dahmer Sr., a civil rights leader who was murdered for his role in defending the right to vote. The group visited the Dahmer School House, Dahmer's grave, the Forest County Courthouse, and the family's home. They spent the day with the Dahmer family, learning about Vernon Dahmer Sr.'s heroic efforts and commitment to social justice.

In **Memphis, Tennessee**, participants visited the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. There, they learned about the Sanitation Workers Strike that brought Dr. King to Memphis and listened to his iconic speeches delivered during his final days. Seeing his preserved hotel room and standing in the spaces where Dr. King led his final calls for justice, the group was struck by the lasting relevance of his message today.

The trips (two in 2024) fostered open and honest discussions among participants. The groups returned to San Mateo with actionable steps to address social justice issues, including a stronger commitment to equity and inclusion within their department.

The San Mateo Police Department expresses its deep gratitude to the Sojourn Project and to the San Francisco Police Department and San Francisco District Attorney's Office for leading these important trips. The department remains committed to continuing participation in the Sojourn Project, ensuring future staff members are exposed to the life-changing lessons of the Civil Rights Movement.

Due to the profound impact of this experience, San Mateo PD first participated in this journey in August 2024, then sent another contingent of officers and community members in November 2024 and plans to send additional participants in June 2025.

For more information about the Sojourn Project and its mission, please visit www.sojournproject.org.

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