



Allen T.J. Mayes, badge #974

## WINNIPEG'S FIRST BLACK POLICE OFFICER

*By John Burchill/Allen Mayes*

*Allen Mayes was a trailblazer, although he didn't see it that way. Becoming a police officer in 1975 was an opportunity. He didn't turn his mind to whether or not he was the first black officer. Much like his family, who were among the first to emigrate to northern Alberta and Saskatchewan from the Oklahoma Territories, at the turn of the last Century. Coming to Canada was an opportunity.*

**B**etween 1905 and 1911, African-American families began travelling north to Canada from Oklahoma seeking the promise of free homestead land and freedom from the discriminatory laws that had been enacted following Oklahoma statehood. The “western underground railroad” as Allen called it, when dozens of families from Oklahoma arrived in Western Canada. Twelve families settled in the Eldon District north of Maidstone, Saskatchewan, the rest carried on to found the community of Amber Valley near Athabasca in Northern Alberta.

### Early Years

Allen's father's family started in Maidstone and moved to Edmonton, where he met his mother, who had moved there from Athabasca. Allen was born in Edmonton, but grew up in Winnipeg -- first living in Point Douglas before moving to East Kildonan.

At the time the Black community in Winnipeg was very small, in fact the 1981 federal Census recorded

only 1,590 Manitobans who listed their ethnic origin as African, 1,395 of them lived in Winnipeg. However growing up in a stable, law abiding home, Allen had no negative impressions regarding the Winnipeg Police. While the Police Department was white, as far as he knew, the infrequent contacts he had were mutually respectful and not unpleasant.

Policing as a profession, however, was not top of his list. He had a 3 year degree in Philosophy and Sociology from the University of Winnipeg and a year of pre-Masters at the University of Manitoba in Philosophy. However there were no opportunities for work in this field.

It was a Canadian Employment Officer who suggested a possible career in policing. Needless to say, because he had no negative experiences with the police and, outside of concerns about safety on the job, his family was supportive of his decision to apply. His application was submitted to Human Resources on October 10, 1975.

## The Academy

Allen's background investigation was completed in November and he was hired in December 1975. He started walking the beat in full uniform, minus the gun (as was normal), patrolling an area near Logan and Main, close to his Point Douglas roots. The irony was, at that time, the area had a notorious reputation and his parents had always advised him "to avoid it at all costs". Recruit Class #87 started on February 9 and ran to April 30, 1976. On graduation Allen was now qualified to carry his firearm on the beat.

Allen recalls there being 25 recruits in Class #87, including one from East St. Paul Police. At least 20 had some relationship to current or former police officers; two were women and one was First Nations. Besides being Black and not having any personal connections on the job, what distinguished Allen from his classmates was having a University Degree and a Black Sash in Chinese Gung Fu. Otherwise they were equally eager to get back on the street after graduation and serve the public.

## Decisions

Although Allen had no negative memories of his time with the Winnipeg Police, as his first-year anniversary approached he felt obligated to make a decision. While he wasn't a fan of Winnipeg's notoriously cold winters, his girlfriend at the time was born and raised in Burnaby, British Columbia and wanted to return to her family and roots. In addition, having trained seriously for 7 years in Chinese Gung Fu, Allen was interested in pursuing cultural studies in Chinese and UBC's Asian Studies Department "beckoned". The pull of the West Coast won out over walking the winter beat in Winnipeg.

Within a month of leaving Winnipeg, he had an apartment in Vancouver and by March 1977 he was enrolled in UBC's intensive Chinese Language program. More Asian Studies took him to the spring of 1979 and another decision -- either move to China or find a job in B.C.

*Besides being Black and not having any personal connections on the job, what distinguished Allen from his classmates was having a University Degree and a Black Sash in Chinese Gung Fu.*

Another opportunity presented itself. Based on his police background and degree, it was suggested he apply for a position as a Probation Officer with B.C. Corrections. His application was accepted and he entered the Justice Institute of B.C.'s corrections program commencing September 1979. Once through the program he began work as a Youth Probation Officer in North Vancouver; remaining in place from December 1979 through to May 1988.

## Law School

In his role as a probation officer Allen liaised with judges, prosecutors, police officers, indigenous court workers (Squamish Band Diversion Committee), social workers, and resource workers. Most significantly, he appeared in Court on a weekly basis and loved it. So, when various co-workers suggested that he attend law school, no arm twisting was needed and he commenced the application process.

Six Canadian law schools offered him a spot and, after consulting with three North Vancouver Judges that he had appeared before over the years, he chose Queen's Law School in Kingston, Ontario. This is the same law school that (retired) Winnipeg Police Superintendent Gord Schumacher attended, however their paths never crossed as Gord started the year after Allen graduated.

After law school Allen returned to B.C. to practice Criminal Law. After working for two Lower Mainland firms and a brief period on his own, he obtained a position in Prince George as a Criminal Defence Legal Aid Staff Lawyer. Eighteen months later he transferred back to the Lower Mainland, to an office in Vancouver's Gastown.

Three years later, after cutbacks to Legal Aid funding, he returned to private practice specializing in Legal Aid Criminal and Youth Defence Law. The majority of his clients came from the "Downtown East Side", the poorest postal code in

the country. Many of these clients suffered from a multiplicity of challenges and were some of the most vulnerable in Canada.

Another 14 years passed before his wife, with children and grandchildren in the Peace River area of Alberta wanted to see her extended family grow up. After some research and with high hopes he moved to B.C.'s Northeast in October 2016 and a new opportunity presented itself for a Criminal Defence lawyer in the Peace Region of B.C. (Dawson Creek). He left behind his West Coast lifestyle for "Winnipeg-like" winters again, but remained close to family. He now has a thriving practice in B.C.'s Peace River area. He has also been called to the Bar in Alberta.

### Looking back

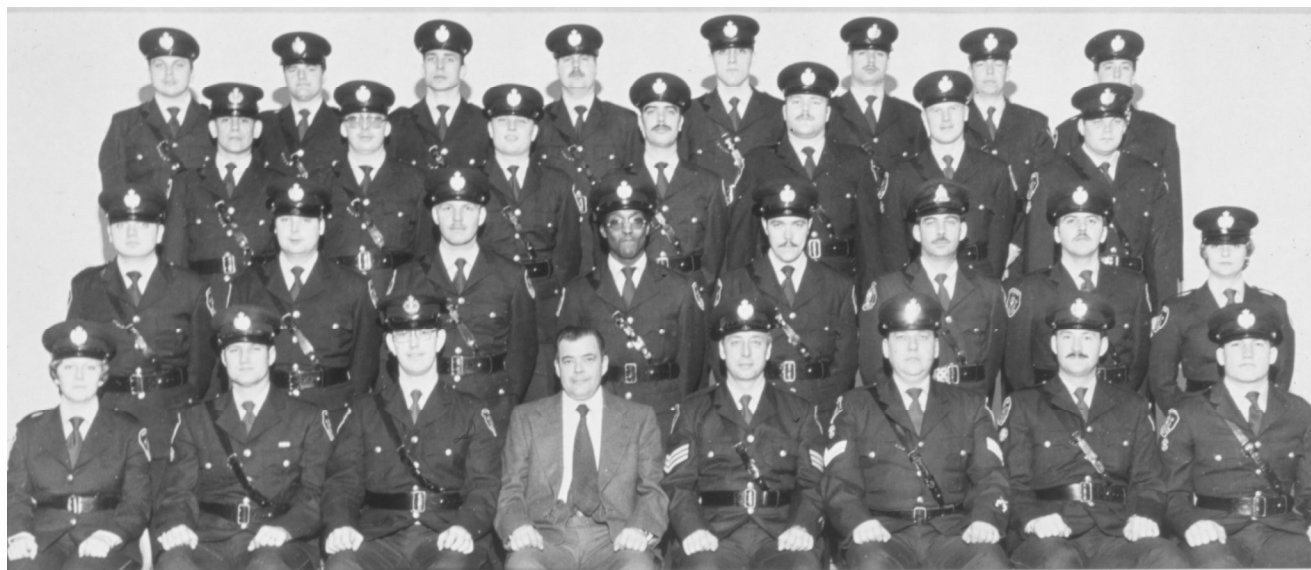
Come 2019 Allen had practiced Criminal and Youth Defence Law for 28 years. Before that he had the pleasure of being a Youth Probation Office for 8 1/2 years. While his entrance into the Justice System

came through no particular plan of his, it all started with a brief stint as a rookie Beat Cop in Winnipeg. Speaking with him in May 2019, Allen had this to say:

*"It is not unreasonable to conclude that my positive experiences "on the job" encouraged me to proceed along legal and related paths. But for the cold, I have no negative memories of my time in uniform. My respect and appreciation for the good deeds that officers perform on a daily basis remains intact.*

*I wholeheartedly recommend police work – for the broadest range of citizens – even if the term is brief, as mine was."*

Thinking of Allen's experience, I am reminded of a quote by Clergyman William Pollard that "it is not always what we know or analyze before we make a decision that makes it a great decision. It is what we do after we make the decision to implement and execute it that makes it a good decision."



RECRUIT CLASS #87  
FEBRUARY 9th - APRIL 30th, 1976

J. MUNCH	T. HIGHAM	D. BRISCOE	R. FINNBOGGASON	D. BELL	D. SHIPMAN	R. GELLER	R. McCASKILL
R. KIRTON	J. BAUER	A. HUISMAN	D. INGRAM	R. IRWIN	S. GOLD	N. HONER	
M. KULL	W. SCHIMNOWSKI	N. HAPPYCHUK	A. MAYES	J. CASON	C. DOWNS (E/W St.P)	R. LEWIS	B. SUNDELL
P. SIGURDSON	R. CLEMENT (Instructor)	D. WARDROP (Instructor)	D. GOVE (A/Sergeant)	C. HILL (A/Staff Inspector)	E. HONKAINMAA (Instructor)	L. KLIPPENSTEIN (Instructor)	J. BERNDSEN

Allen Mayes, Recruit Class 87 (1976)