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Partners in time

Police give youth center participants valuable insights on much more than just their homework

Steve Reed and Steve McDaniel

In 2016, while children were happily creating art projects inside Weisser Park Youth Center, a young man, barely an adult himself, was shot and killed just 60 feet away. The sobering tragedy was compounded by the lack of information coming from the community to help Fort Wayne police solve the crime.

We were once again facing the stark reality in our neighborhoods that children and their families did not always have a positive, trusting relationship with police officers. Attitudes ranged from fear to disrespect to, sometimes, hatred.

Now, just three years later, there is hope, there is change and there is trust.

The Partner Officer Program was initiated in all three Fort Wayne Parks and Recreation youth centers in January 2018 and is a partnership between the Fort Wayne Police Department, Fort Wayne UNITED and the Fort Wayne Parks & Recreation Department. Uniformed, off-duty police officers share shifts at the youth centers, where they build relationships with the children who participate, as well as their families. They play sports, help with homework, share a meal and teach the children about safety. Most importantly, they listen.

These off-duty officers have become fixtures in the youth centers. Now, the children recognize them as caring adults, not just a uniform that is only visible at crime scenes. And by forming meaningful relationships, these officers have become a friend our young citizens trust, someone they know they can call if they find themselves in a difficult situation.

The newest addition to the Partner Officer Program is called the School Success Celebration and is led by the officers. All the children take turns sharing their accomplishments from the previous week – a sort of “show and

tell” time.

There have been stories of receiving a good grade on a test, or doing chores at home without being asked, getting improvement compliments from a teacher, even helping a friend with homework. The children's accomplishments are celebrated. This is a great way to help the children recognize all the positive things they're already doing and inspires them to do more.

In just a short time, youth center staff have noticed how much more comfortable the children are when they interact with police officers. Before, many of the children didn't want to talk to a visiting officer, or even stand near them. Now, when officers show up, the children run to greet them, often with hugs.

The Partner Officer Program is a complement to the Community Unity events that take place six times a year in the youth centers. During these free events, families are welcomed to the centers to enjoy a meal and interact with law enforcement professionals to learn more about neighborhood safety. This effort to communicate with entire families helps to reinforce the relationships children are building with the officers.

Keeping our community, especially our children, safe is critical to the current and future success of Fort Wayne. We must invest in the lives of our young people. In a short time, they will be leaders in our community. It's vital that we prepare them and show them how to be responsible, give back and make a lasting impact.

Indiana Parks and Recreation Association recently recognized the Partner Officer Program with the Innovative Program Award at the 2019 IPRA Conference. Community Unity Nights were recognized in 2018 at the 2018 Summit on Out of School Learning in the Out-of-School Champions showcase.

These honors are impressive, but we are even more pleased with the results we are seeing every day in the young students who are growing and learning with the help of our youth center staff and the Partner Officers.

Steve Reed, left, is chief of the Fort Wayne Police Department and Steve McDaniel is director of Fort Wayne Parks and Recreation.

To learn more The Parks and Recreation Department's three community youth centers offer a safe, fun environment after school from 3 to 8 p.m. and are available from noon to 5 p.m. when Fort Wayne Community Schools are closed during the school year, and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the summer. School-age youth are encouraged to do homework, play and enjoy a nourishing evening meal, and they also have the opportunity to participate in activities including performing arts, basketball leagues, fitness and nutrition, STEM programs and etiquette. All programming is free. Visit www.fortwayneparks.org for more information.

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