

MAKING AN IMPRESSION

/Abbie Darst, Program Coordinator

Kentucky police departments create programs to engage young people and build positive relationships

To protect and serve is the creed many law enforcement agencies hang their hat on, but many officers go well beyond protecting and serving the communities in which they live. They teach, mentor and inspire the youngsters in an attempt to reverse the negative perceptions of law enforcement officers that pervade their media-hyped, TV-drama influenced lives.

Several police departments across the commonwealth have taken the idea of the citizens' police academy and given it a twist – reaching out to the younger generation to educate them about the reality behind law enforcement, dispel misconceptions about policing and build positive relationships with the youth and families of their communities.

"If [the youth] walk away from the [academy] having a better understanding of what we do, having had fun learning the difference between what the misperception and the reality is, it's worth its weight in gold," said Bowling Green Police Chief Doug Hawkins. "And really, in the long run, they can then educate their friends about the truths."

Bowling Green began what they call the Junior Police Academy in 2006. Operated much like a day camp, the department's three-day program targets 10 to 13 year-old children

and strives to give them a better awareness of what law enforcement is.

"We really built it around the philosophy of what would be interesting to kids, what could they learn from, and we wanted to make it as hands on as possible," Hawkins said. "One of the ways you hold kids' attention is to have them involved and engaged."

Conducted at Safety City, an educational facility, which also consists of a small replica of the city of Bowling Green, the program is an information-packed three days allowing the children to explore and experience many different aspects of the police department. The program touches on areas such as drug and gang awareness; computerized composite sketches; traffic stops; first aid; and K-9, motorcycle and bicycle unit demonstrations. However, the two most in-depth sections of the program are crime scene investigation and a mock criminal trial.

On the second day of the JPA, half of the day is spent on CSI: Bowling Green, during which the children learn about what CSI actually is and what law enforcement officers are capable of doing as opposed to what is seen on TV. Then, they are given the opportunity to enter a set-up crime scene and dust for fingerprints, find physical evidence and learn how and what DNA evidence can be collected from a crime scene.

"One of the things that we're able to do in this environment is dispel rumors or misconceptions with these 10 to 13 year-olds that adults have," Hawkins said. "We call it the CSI >>



/Photos submitted



■ A Bowling Green Junior Police Academy student dusts a shell cartridge for fingerprints during the CSI: Bowling Green section of the academy.

◀ During Bowling Green's JPA, students use Fatal Vision goggles to simulate alcohol impairment. While wearing the goggles, students were asked to walk around placed traffic cones in an effort to show them how significantly alcohol consumption can affect physical actions.



effect, where people think law enforcement can solve crime, run lab tests and get DNA results back in unrealistic times... We use JPA as an opportunity to correct the misconceptions of what law enforcement can do and what they are supposed to do."

On the third day, the children participate in a mock trial where they serve as the attorneys, judge and jurors and learn the ins-and-outs of a criminal trial. By the time they get to graduation at the end of the third day, the children have run the gamut on what Bowling Green's police officers do and how and why they do it.

"There is pure joy on their face on graduation day; they have loved every minute of what they've done," Hawkins said. "They haven't been bored; the parents are excited. It really is a fun event to go to the graduation because you see the real excitement of them having been in the class."

But possibly more important, they have spent three days in a positive environment, developing relationships with the officers that serve their community.

"The interaction between the children and the officers is the most beneficial part of having these programs," said Officer Andy Myatt who runs the Lexington Division of Police's Junior Citizens Police Academy. "A lot of times, children can be afraid of officers to a degree, but it's important to have that positive interaction with them and for them to see that we have a human side too."

Lexington's JCPA began in 2004 and runs as a weeklong academy for 10- to 14-year-old children. Lexington normally runs three academies each year, but was only able to run two this past summer. Their curriculum is very similar to Bowling Green's JPA, but Lexington's JCPA also includes visits to the mounted patrol, air support and hazardous devices units, as well as a demonstration from Commercial Vehicle Enforcement's roll over car for seatbelt safety. However, the environment of their camp is

structured differently.

"It is a disciplined environment," Myatt said. "Children are required to show proper manners, respond with yes sir, no sir, yes ma'am, no ma'am. They are issued an ID badge and are required to bring it with them every day. We also have a motto that we leave places better than when we got there, so every place we go, we make the place better."

"They kind of pick up on that philosophy and get a little bit of a sense of personal responsibility and sense of discipline of what it takes to become a police officer," Myatt continued. "It is kind of an educational way we can show them, these are some pitfalls that you can fall into – if you aren't a good citizen, you don't listen to your parents and you don't listen to your teachers, you are going to have a difficult time if this is a career you are interested in."

Likewise, the Louisville Metro Police Department's Youth Citizens' Police Academy is centered around the idea of instilling discipline, requiring respectful attitudes and encouraging responsibility. Officer Minerva Virola, who coordinates the YCPA, uses these principles to help build character and confidence in the teenagers she mentors through the program. After graduating 17 YCPA classes, Virola has proven her techniques for getting students involved and accomplishing her overall mission.

Virola identifies neighborhoods and communities whose citizens complain that the police do not do anything for them, and then she goes to those neighborhoods and presents this program as an opportunity for the community to partner with the police department to help the young people in their community, she said.

"I do this basically to let them know that we are human and here to protect them and take care of them," Virola said. "We are not here to run the world, we just follow the law. Second, I let these kids exercise their rights. I let them know they have a voice and they can exercise that, but they have to do it professionally, >>

■ Louisville Metro Police Department Officer Minerva Virola marches with the Youth Citizens' Police Academy at Iroquois Park in Louisville. The marching drills, in addition to uniform requirements, help foster a disciplined atmosphere during the two-week academy.





courteously and respectfully... They have to stand up straight, stick out their chest and be proud."

Louisville Metro's two-week program, geared at teens ages 14 to 17, is often attended by students whose lives may not be on the right track when they come in because of their backgrounds and experiences. But Virola uses the academy to break down the stereotypes they may have of law enforcement and build



up their confidence and belief in themselves.

"I tell them they are powerful and strong – that they are loved and people care about them," she said. "That's what they need – to know and hear that. A lot of times their lives don't show them that."

In the four years that Virola has offered the YCPA, the program has dramatically impacted the lives of several attendees. Anna, a YCPA graduate, recently was awarded a \$50,000 scholarship from a Louisville women's group based on her YCPA participation. Anna, who had gotten into trouble as a younger adolescent, had a felony charge on her record and had spent time in a girls' group home, chose to turn her life around after attending the YCPA, Virola said. She was unable to get government assistance to attend college because of her felonious background. In an effort to really help Anna get money toward college, her school guidance counselor said, "There

must be something special that you've done, something that makes you unique.' When Anna told about her YCPA participation and the letters of acknowledgement that she had received from the mayor, council members and senators, among others, she was able to land the \$50,000 scholarship and is now a student in the University of Louisville's nursing program, Virola said.

"I think [this program] is important because so many kids come from single-parent homes or homes where there is no real role model, and we can help be that role model for them," said LMPD Officer Ray Page, who assisted Virola during the mounted patrol unit demonstration on the fourth day of the YCPA. "It's important to be present and to have a positive influence from the police department on them."

Showing young people a different side of law enforcement is key to an underlying mission of youth and junior police academies – to potentially inspire them to look at law enforcement as a future career choice.

"This 10 to 13 age group is not by accident," Bowling Green's Hawkins said. "Ten is old enough for them to focus in the class for three days. But the 13 being the maximum age was by design because at 14 they are eligible for our Explorer Post. We have... created levels by which they can be involved in the police department... This is a strategic continuation of exposure for young people in order for us to engage them in some education, but also to promote law enforcement as a career opportunity."

In Bowling Green, a child could theoretically come to the Junior Police Academy at age 10, then follow that interest through by getting involved with the explorers program at 14, the cadet program at 18 and go on to become an officer at 21, Hawkins explained.

For many years, police departments have used explorer and cadet programs as a recruitment tool for high school- and college-age students to develop an interest in law enforcement as a career. These programs allow these students a behind-the-scenes look >>

Lexington Division of Police Officer Stephen White shows members of Lexington's Junior Citizens' Police Academy how the controls of a helicopter's infrared camera work.

Lexington Officer Stephen White talks to junior academy students about the Lexington Division of Police's helicopter unit. During the tour, students learned how the helicopter works and how often the division uses its helicopters, and they were allowed to sit in the cockpit.





at what law enforcement officers do and have hands-on access to learning officer duties.

"The challenge is, if you build a JPA and it is targeted at an age group, if you do not have opportunities for them to get engaged after that experience, you may lose them," Hawkins said. "So, what I would suggest is that you build this continuum of opportunity for these folks.

"But because we have this tie-in and this age group is designed to then lead them into the next level, I think it is important to do that," Hawkins continued. "If not, you have this stand-alone program that may or may not create a lasting impression, and if you're not providing other follow-up opportunities, then you don't know what the impact on these kids is."

Louisville's YCPA has encouraged numerous teens to get involved with Louisville Metro's explorer program.

"I usually get five or six [teens] out of my academy to experience/try the explorers program," Virola said. "They may not stay because it may not be for them, but it has piqued their interest and helped them decide what they do or do not want to do with their lives."

Whether they are called youth citizens' or junior police academies, and regardless of their exact structure, these programs allow officers to reach out to the youth of their communities, shape their lives and their ideas and essentially create well-exposed, productive members of their community. With just a relatively small investment in time, these officers can make a huge impact in the future of young citizens. J

◀ During Louisville Metro's annual Kentucky Law Enforcement Explorer Academy, students participated in a drill where they had a confrontation with an officer dressed in 'red man' gear. After successfully subduing the 'red man,' participants had to handcuff this dummy as if it were their suspect and then immediately write a report about the entire incident.

EXPLORING THEIR OPTIONS

The Louisville Metro Police Department Explorers program hosts an annual Kentucky Law Enforcement Explorer Academy each summer, inviting cadets from departments across the state. This academy, like many of the activities most explorer posts across the state engage in, allows these high school- and sometimes college-age teens to get a good sense of what it will be like to go through a police training academy, whether it is at Louisville Metro, Lexington, the Kentucky State Police or Department of Criminal Justice Training.

Since most explorer and cadet programs are geared at early recruitment efforts, the agencies that participate in the explorers academy want to expose their explorers to as many facets of the law enforcement career as possible so that if they choose to become officers after reaching age 21, they are educated, motivated and prepared for what they will face on that career journey.

"I hope they take away a sense of maturity and of how serious a job this is," said Officer Jeremy Henry, who is responsible for the Owensboro Police Department's explorer program. "Because it is one of the more serious jobs you can have."

The explorers' academy offers a real police academy setting with 6 a.m. wake-up calls, physical training and a structured environment, Henry said.

"When I first joined the program, I thought this academy would just be fun and games, but this is the real deal," said Jessica Tong, an 18-year-old Owensboro explorer. "It teaches self discipline through a very structured environment."

"The PT helps out a lot because the motivation we receive from the instructors carries throughout the academy and helps us push through even when it is hard," added KSP Post 4 Explorer Timothy Nunn, 18.

Beyond discipline and motivation, the academy also offers early camaraderie building and networking opportunities for young people who plan they are going to pursue a career in law enforcement.

"My favorite part [of the academy] is everybody joining as one and learning that as law enforcement officers you should always have each others' back," Tong said.

Because explorers from across the state attend this academy, various departments and agencies are able to build ties that will hopefully carry through to their law enforcement careers.

"It gives us a connection," said KSP Post 12 Explorer Alex Stumbo. "KSP can cover the whole state and if I meet someone here, that comes into play. When I actually become an officer, I'll have that connection with other departments." ■

STRANGE STORIES FROM THE BEAT

Broken Head for Beer

Seems this Arkansas guy wanted some beer pretty badly. He decided that he would just throw a concrete block through a liquor store window, grab some booze and run. So he lifted the concrete block and heaved it over his head at the window. It bounced back and hit the would-be thief on the head, knocking him unconscious. Seems the liquor store window was made of Plexi-Glass. The whole event was caught on videotape.



This driver's license was actually presented at a traffic stop.

Dumbest Fake Driver's License

Running stop light - \$100

DUI - \$5,000

Not wearing a seat belt - \$50

Putting you and your girlfriend on your fake driver's license - PRICELESS



Man Calls 911 Over 28-year-old Son's Messy Bedroom

An Ohio man who argued with his grown son over a messy bedroom said he overreacted when he called 911. Andrew Mizesak called authorities after his 28-year-old son threw a plate of food across the kitchen table and made a fist at him when told to clean his basement room.



Just Give Me the Cash

The Ann Arbor News crime column reported that a man walked into a Burger King in Ypsilanti, Michigan at 5 a.m., flashed a gun and demanded cash. The clerk turned him down because he said he could not open the cash register without a food order. When the man ordered onion rings, the clerk said they were not available for breakfast. The man, frustrated, walked away.

Cereal DUI

A Massachusetts man may wish he had breakfast in bed instead of in his car. Police said a man who was stopped for erratic driving was eating a bowl of cereal and milk while he drove. The 48-year-old man also was driving with an expired license. The man was cited for unlicensed operation, failure to stay in lanes and operating to endanger.



» IF YOU HAVE ANY

funny, interesting or strange stories from the beat, please send them to elizabeth.thomas@ky.gov