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Police and kids join forces in Providence

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In urban America, the common belief is that cops and teenagers — especially kids at risk — don't like each other. The social theorists explain that the "need to belong" intensifies in adolescence and, on the streets of inner-city neighborhoods, even saying hello to police officers can bring about suspicion by vigilant peers. Exhaustive studies by the leading researchers at the Annie Casey Foundation argue that children of color incur a disproportionate number of arrests and that the subsequent targeting has led to hostility toward public authority in general, and police in particular. Cops, on the other hand, complain that it is frustrating to always be the enemy, shunned by kids and families.

But in Providence last week, a very different kind of interaction took place. On a balmy night for early December, 12 teenage boys living in the Hartford Park Public Housing Development and 10 police officers who patrol their neighborhood met in a cavernous common room in the development. It was a meeting that in a previous time and day would have heralded tension and concern. But as the officers entered the room, each boy left his seat to shake their hands and exchange greetings with a kind of ease that can't be faked. After the officers took their seats, they were joined by high-ranking police officials, Mayor Cicilline and Stephen O'Rourke, the executive director of the Providence Housing Authority and host of the event. The aroma of Cuban arroz con pollo suffused the air from the kitchen as more guests crowded into the large room.

They had gathered at Hartford Park to celebrate the completion of

Providence's first Youth & Police Initiative (YPI), an innovative program developed by North American Family Institute (NAFI), a nonprofit organization well known for serving adjudicated and at-risk youth in Rhode Island and other states for many years. The purpose of the YPI training is to help inner-city teenagers and the cops who patrol their neighborhoods get to know each other through sharing life histories, team building and having in-depth dialogue about their challenges — for kids, growing up in a tough neighborhood, and for cops, keeping the neighborhood safe.

The YPI training is structured so that the participating youth meet for two weeks without the officers so they can process their feelings and freely express any negative experiences they've had with the police. With the help of the YPI trainers, they learn to take ownership of the choices they've made as they passionately prepare presentations about their lives and goals to eventually share with patrol officers who join them for two evening sessions.

With growing public-speaking ability and a new-found mission to improve safety in their own neighborhood, they meet the officers with palpable confidence and purpose. By the conclusion of the training, the officers know a lot more about these kids, especially their hopes and dreams. In turn, the participating youth know the officers by name, and they know the path each took to becoming a cop, including the troubles they had had as kids. They learn that cops, too, watch ESPN, haven't always done the right thing and get scared in volatile situations. Stereotypes melt away, cell numbers are exchanged and friendships form. They end by planning a future event together, beginning with a celebration dinner to honor how much they dis-

covered they have in common, which is what brought them to Hartford Park last week.

After dinner in the community room, the NAFI trainers asked all of the police officers and housing-authority officials to form a line at the front of the room. One by one, each graduate of the training went to the microphone to reflect upon his experiences with the police and how it had affected him, before walking the line to shake hands. Their families cheered and clapped.

The courage of the boys was inspiring, but much credit also goes to the Providence police officers in District 5 who opened themselves to barely known teenagers. It was hard to believe that only a week earlier, these kids of color living with limited financial means in a tough neighborhood and the cops who patrolled them had professed distrust for each other. We salute the vision of the housing authority's Mr. O'Rourke for bringing this cutting-edge training to this city, as well as the city's chief of police, Col. Dean Esserman, and Mayor Cicillini for their support. This innovative partnership of the police department, the housing authority and a nonprofit human-services agency is raising a new set of possibilities to reduce crime and gang involvement in Providence. It should serve as a model for other urban communities.

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