

Dorchester Reporter

Program connects cops with at-risk teens

By *Jackie Gentile, Special to the Reporter*

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Youth Link, a program of the North American Family Institute (NAFI), is connecting at-risk youth with Boston police officers to keep the kids off the streets and out of trouble. Through the Youth & Police Initiative (YPI) and the Youth Leadership Academy (YLA), both of which challenge local youth to rise above the influence of gang life, Youth Link offers them hope and opportunities to pursue an education and a career path.

To raise awareness about the program, the first annual Changing the Game basketball tournament took place on March 13th at UMass-Boston. Two Boston police officers and three local teens made up each of the 24 participating teams in the Adidas-sponsored tourney.

Officer Eric Bradshaw has worked in District B-3 for 15 years and often runs into groups of kids on his beat. Seeing a dramatic change in the program participants surprised him.

"It reinforces that every kid's different," Bradshaw told the Reporter. "Every kid's not a gang member," he says. "It shows them how to be responsible. Shows the police officers where the kids come from, shows the kids where the police officers come from."

Bradshaw, who attends every program graduation, participates in YPI, debunking misconceptions between local youth and police officers.

"Treat us as individuals doing a job. We'll treat you like young men and women as individuals. See us for what we are," he tells them.

"I think [Youth Link] motivated me more to finish college, get a career," says Franklin Field native Peter, who asked that his last name not be used. The third of four children, he is the first to participate in the program; his younger brother took part in the summer camp as well.

Before attending YPI, Peter was skeptical like many other program participants. He was surprised to learn that cops "basically were good people."

"People are always thinking that cops are bad but they just doing they jobs, I guess," Peter said. "I thought we were going to do [the meeting with the police] just to do it. I didn't think it was gonna work. Thought it was just going to just be for no reason," he adds.

YPI was a turning point in Peter's life. He will soon earn his GED and plans to attend a community college first and then enroll at a state school. He's a well-rounded young man who plays football, baseball, basketball and tennis and hopes to make it big in the music business someday. Though Peter raps and records with friends, he has recorded solo material that he wrote himself.

"I'm trying to get to that stage where everybody can just listen to it," he says. "That's one of my dreams."

Joe Robinson, Director of the Franklin Field Community Center, counsels participants and their parents through the college application process. Twenty young men and women of the most recently graduated group registered for college.

"[We] help them turn the corner from stuff they used to do," says Robinson.

According to Bradshaw, the kids are surprised when they find out that the officers are approachable, have families like they do and share similar interests. Connections are made and experiences are shared, bringing the cops and kids closer to understanding each other.

Bradshaw stresses to the kids that the police are not out to get them but to protect them.

"That's a 1000 points when you got people in the community that are gonna look out for you."

Matthew Swartz, Director of Vocational Training and Development, runs the culinary arts program and often takes the kids on field trips to restaurants, concerts and pro sports games. After local kids join the program, the changes are noticeable from day one.

"What happens, when they do YPI with the police - and I've seen it - it's like magic," he says. The officers tell their stories about growing up, becoming cops and even getting into trouble with the law when they were younger. "That's us breaking down the stereotypes and the barriers," he adds.

During "peaceful summers," as he says, Swartz sees improvements firsthand. Kids are outside playing on the basketball court adorned with a peace sign, a project Youth Link participants took upon themselves in an effort to clean up the neighborhood.