



Officers Provide Role Models for Fifth Graders

by **Mari A. Schaefer**

Philadelphia Inquirer

Three years ago, the fifth graders in Sue Phillips' class in Upper Darby were, to be generous, a handful.

Their disruptions were nearly constant. They fought. They disrespected the staff. Of her 23 students at Stonehurst Hills Elementary, 17 were suspended at one time or another.

She noticed something else from journal entries she made them keep: They had a low opinion of police. "They act like there [sic] the kings of the universe," read one. "I don't really trust UD cops," read another.

So Phillips, a 16-year teaching veteran, invited [IPMBA Instructor] Jim Reif, a bicycle officer, to speak to her class and showed him the journal entries.

"It killed me - reading these letters - it killed me," said Reif, a 23-year member of the force.

In that visit, Reif pulled no punches about why officers do what they do. He talked about respect, taking responsibility, and the consequences of bad choices.

He won over the students - and his boss, too. Plans are afoot to have an officer/mentor in every fifth-grade class, reaching a combined total of about 900 students.

"These kids needed the not-so-friendly officer program," Reif said. "They needed some tough love and someone to call them on it."

Said Phillips: "We started to see a turnaround. They were good kids but lacked a role model."

The journal entries and thank-you notes to Reif reflected the shift: "You are cool, better than the average cop," and, "I thought police were mean and filled with doughnuts, but they are not really like that."

Wrote a student named Kelliah: "I want to tell you that if you didn't change anyone in here, you did change me," as she explained that when her cousins and friends were about to fight, she stood up to them. The near-scrap ended there.

A year later, that first class came back for a reunion visit - and only one of the now-sixth graders had been suspended.

Reif's visits became a monthly event in Phillips' class and caught the eye of Michael Chitwood, superintendent of police. He expanded the program to include all fifth grades in Stonehurst Hills, Highland Park, and Bywood Elementary Schools.

"It is unbelievable how that interaction with kids not only led to positive relationships with the kids and cops but also a heads-up on issues," Chitwood said.

Louis F. DeVlieger, superintendent of schools, said the partnership had been a great experience in a community with people from 70 countries who may not know all the local "rules of the road."

Two of those officer/mentors, Ryan Wiseley and Eric Colella, were straddling their tricked-out police mountain bikes outside Beverly Hills Middle School the other day, waiting for the last bell. About 300 students then poured out of classes and down Maderia Road, rolling with energy.

The two officers chatted with the youngsters, hoping to keep a lid on the after-school fights and ensuing crowds.



“It is a good connection,” Colella said. “They see we are regular people. They see I have a son and like to have fun like everybody else.”

On a recent visit to Phillips’ class, Reif immediately asked who had been in trouble since his last trip. A few hands shot up.

“How about you, young man?” Reif asked, pointing to Isaiah Rankins, 11. “Give me the story, bro.”

After trying unsuccessfully to deflect responsibility - “He kept poking me” - Isaiah admitted his behavior probably escalated a scuffle that landed him in hot water.

“God forbid he poked you,” Reif said. “You are lucky you didn’t hurt that young man.”

The conversations turned to other subjects.

What if you witness a crime? Should you tell?

“If something happened to your family member, would you guys want someone to step up?” Reif asked.

What if your friends blame you for a crime they did?

“They are not your friend. Pick and choose your friends wisely,” Reif said.

He brought along a surprise for their last class together: baseball-type cards with a photo of him on his bike. He said he would sign them if they wanted.

Within seconds, he was mobbed like a rock star.

Holding a signed card secure in his hand, Khalil Sulayman, 12, said he thought of Reif as “a second father on the streets.”

Reif, he knows, cares about him “a lot. But probably not as much as I care about him.”

On Friday, about 400 fifth graders, their officer/mentors, and teachers will gather at Naylor’s Run Park for an end-of-year picnic. The officers will flip burgers, a DJ will be on hand, and much dancing is expected.

“The electric slide,” Reif said.

This article appeared in the June 11, 2010, edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer and was reprinted in the Summer 2010 issue of IPMBA News.