

TEAM BLUE BLAZE

Introduction

In 2015, my 10-year-old brother stood in front of 8,000 state troopers at a conference to give a speech. He had been fighting brain cancer for almost four years at this point and was terminal. Eli was a big fan of law enforcement and because of the courage and strength he showed during his journey, law enforcement was a big fan of his.

But, not all people see law enforcement as heroes as Eli did. These days, there seems to be a heightened negative attitude toward law enforcement as well as a misguided perception about what it does for communities and individuals. Songs are being written about hating or hurting the police, simple services at restaurants are being denied officers out of protest, they are spat at and yelled at when doing their job. These attitudes and perceptions grow out of something, whether it is founded or unfounded.

As a junior at Athens Bible School in Alabama, I have capped-off what will be a 13-year Girl Scout career by earning my Gold Award, the highest award available to girls. For my project, I have created a bridge of communication between law enforcement and communities. I have made available educational resources for law enforcement to understand the importance of positive interaction with citizens. I have influenced citizens' attitudes toward and perceptions of law enforcement by casting a positive, more heroic light on the officers in my community. This will, in turn, begin to create a more respectful and safe environment and maybe even inspire someone to be the police officer like my brother wanted to be.

Nip It In the Bud

Research by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention from a January 2018 article (*Interactions between Youth and Law Enforcement*) suggests that interaction with police as a kid makes the biggest impact on attitudes toward the police in later life. The report goes on to say that youth between the ages of 16 and 24 has more interaction with police than any other age group. Based on this information, I plan to "nip it in the bud," as the most famous and lovable law enforcement officer Barney Fife would say. I developed a program directed at kids ages 5 to 12 that creates a positive early interaction between police officers, thereby influencing perception and attitude early in life.



Research shows that negative attitudes cause a divide between law enforcement and communities making it hard for law enforcement agencies to do their job and keep communities safe. Furthermore, individuals with negative attitudes toward law enforcement are more likely to be unlawful.

With a more positive attitude toward police from an early age, kids will grow up to influence their communities. Plus, older youth will be less likely to get into trouble with law enforcement if they had a positive experience with law enforcement when they are young.

Go Team

Heroizing athletes is a long-time, widely and wildly accepted practice among kids... and adults.



Many kids enjoy collecting baseball or football cards of their favorite players. For the take action portion of my Gold Award, I created trading cards of Police Officers for the officers to give to kids as they interact with them. In keeping with the sports team theme, I created "Team Blue Blaze" with a logo. I visited a second grade class and a sixth grade class to find out what kinds of things they might want to know about an officer. Then I prepared a questionnaire with that information for the officers. This gave me the facts, or stats, similar to baseball cards, for each officer. I worked with a graphics designer to learn about software to design the cards and asked a professional photographer to take pictures. The cards are full-color, front and back, and are business card size so they are convenient to carry and cheap to print. Eighteen officers, including two K-9, with the Madison Police

Department participated. After the cards were complete, 18 additional officers asked to have cards made. I provided the template that I used to the department so that the officers could make cards whenever they wanted to.

Funding

I provided the Madison Police Department with digital files of the cards. The department purchased the cards on its own through a community auxiliary fund that supports community projects. I had no expenses for this project since it was just providing the digital design and digital templates. My parents pay for my website which I will mention later. Any professional services for design and photography was donated.



Outreach and Education

I shared about my project and about community policing with the news media by interviewing with TV news, a radio show, and print media. I also have a press release on my website for any media to use. Each opportunity was also a chance to educate others about the importance of



community relations between police and citizens. The Madison Police Department also took the opportunity to share information and pictures as the project progressed on its social media sites.

Secondly, I created a website, www.scoutingforgold.com. During my project, officers were able to learn about the project and sign up to join the team at the website. Now that the

project is finished, the cards have been printed for Madison officers to hand out at events and any time they are around children in their communities. The website remains live until December 2020 so that law enforcement departments anywhere can download a generic template that I created and print their own cards to join TEAM BLUE BLAZE.

Thirdly, I recorded a video for the website about the importance of community relations in policing. I also collected useful online resources for law enforcement agencies to learn about community relations and have included the video and these resources on my website. Law enforcement agencies should learn how important it is for citizens and officers to communicate and have positive interactions.

Measurability

After the cards were printed, I observed kids receiving the cards from officers at an event. I asked the kids what they thought about the cards and what they thought about police officers. Out of six kids polled, one did not want any cards. His dad said he was too shy. The other kids were eager to receive a card and wanted to know how they could collect cards of all the officers. The officers said they enjoyed having the cards as a tool to help them interact in a positive way with the kids - a way to break the ice and have something to talk about.

Sustainability

Eighteen Madison Police officers received 250 trading cards each during the first round of printing (they have reprinted a few times and more officers have joined in). The Madison Police Chief, David Jernigan, has approved the continuation of the



program, and I have heard that the Mayor of Madison is fond of it as he is a baseball card collector. By providing templates to Madison and making a template available on my website for downloading, this project may continue for as long as they want to do it.

The goal of this project was not to provide trading cards, or even to provide a tool for police officers to interact with kids. It was to change negative attitudes toward law enforcement in communities. The kids that receive trading cards have had a positive first impression and they will share their experience and grow into adulthood with that experience. They will teach their children and the positive attitude will continue. This ripple effect will shape communities as time goes on.

My Experience

I worked on this project through 2019 and completed paperwork in time for the April 2020 ceremony. My effort did start out slow. I originally started out working with my hometown's mayor's office and police chief. The chief met with me once to learn about the project but then would never approve anything so that we could move forward. He stopped responding to my emails. After a few months passed, I finally told him that I had a template for the cards on my website and if they decided to participate it was available at any time. Then I moved on and contacted the neighboring city of Madison.



I was pretty sad about my own town not participating because our mayor loved the project, as did our city council which invited me to present the idea at a meeting. The chief is very nice and helps us with an event we do for our charity, but for whatever reason, he wasn't sold on this project or was too busy to work with me. (I explained to him that I could work with anyone in the department because I knew he was busy, but he seemed to want to have a lot of control and wanted me to change some things. He even wanted to be the photographer himself. But, when I told him that part of my leadership requirements was to work with other people in the community and a photographer would be an opportunity for me, I don't think he liked that) But, as my mom told me, that is how real life works, not everyone loves your ideas or how you do things. So, I didn't stand around at that dead end and found a way around the obstacle so that I could still accomplish my goal.

I let the chief go from my team, and I let the mayor's office representative go even though she was very interested and helpful. She was trying to pursue grant funding for them to print the cards and to host a seminar for officers about community relations, but when the chief stopped responding and would not approve anything there wasn't any reason to get funding. I did learn about grant writing and applications with her, and I talked many times with a foundation that was eager to provide funding for them to print the cards. But, since it wasn't working out, I dropped

them and added the community relations officer from Madison Police Department. She, along with a photographer, a videographer, graphics designer, marketing advisor, and a former girl scout and leader made up my team.

When I started working with Madison, it all went smoothly and quickly. This has been such a fun project for me. I was able to learn a little about graphics design while designing the logo, cards, and web page. I learned some about web page design software and some about preparing files for printing. I helped with photography. I learned about contacting the media. I learned how to interview people and how to be interviewed by the news media. I had a chance to talk with a mayor, a chief of police, and made a presentation to a city council. I worked with a police department and its officers. I set schedules, meetings, and deadlines. I answered emails from news reporters and other business people. I even talked on the phone with people I didn't know, which was new. I'm more used to texting. I also learned a lot about writing - writing for this report, writing for a website, writing a press release, and writing lots of emails to different people. Marketing, Graphics Design, or Content Writing is a possible major for me in college, so this was a great real-world experience.



I have had a lot of great feedback about the cards, too. I've had some kids that I know send me pictures where they had received a card and loved it. I learned a lot about patience and how, even though something is very big in my life, it's not necessarily big in someone else's life that I need to work with. I learned how to adjust to obstacles or unexpected changes. Patience, flexibility, working with others are all things that I can apply in any area of my life now or even as an adult - in my home life or work life.

I am grateful for this opportunity to give back to my community with this project. Just maybe a kid will grow up to be the police officer Eli did not get to be.