

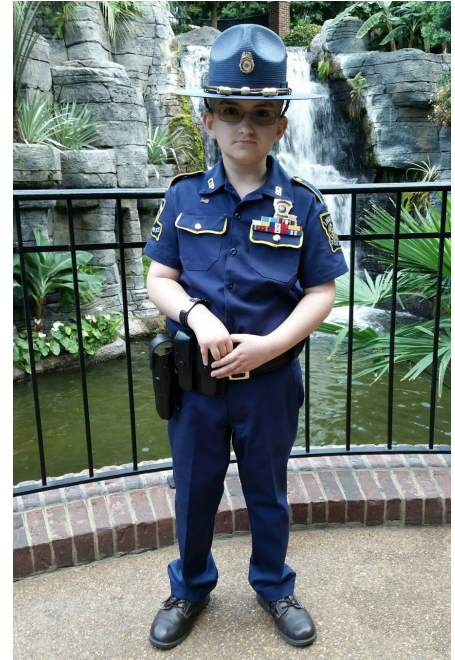
TEAM BLUE BLAZE

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 its service. Songs are being written about hating or hurting the police, simple services 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 now at Athens Bible School in Athens, Alabama, I wish to cap-off what will be a 13-year Girl Scout career when I graduate by earning my Gold Award, the highest award available to girls. For my project, I have influence attitudes and perceptions of law enforcement by casting a positive, more heroic light on the officers in my community. This will, in turn, create a more respectful and safe environment in our community and maybe even inspire someone to be a police officer.



Nip It In the Bud

Research by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention from January 2018 suggests that youth-to-police interaction makes the biggest impact on developing 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 13 that created a positive early interaction between police officers, thereby influencing perception and attitude.

Research shows that negative attitudes grow a divide between law enforcement and communities making it hard for law enforcement agencies to keep communities safe. Furthermore, individuals with negative attitudes toward police 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 have 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 the officers. In keeping with the sports team theme, I created "Team Blue Blaze" with a logo. Each officer filled out a questionnaire about themselves to be included as facts, or stats, similar to baseball cards. I worked with a graphics designer to utilize software to design the cards and asked a professional photographer to take pictures. Eighteen officers with the Madison Police Department signed up to participate. 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 asked to purchase the cards through a community auxiliary fund that supports community projects. I had no expenses for this project as it was just providing the digital design and templates.

Outreach

I was able to share about my project 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. The Madison Police Department shared information and pictures as the project progressed on its social media pages many times.

Secondly, I created a website,

www.scoutingforgold.com. Officers were able to learn about the project and to sign up to join. Now that the TEAM is complete for my Gold Award, the cards have been printed for Madison officers to hand out at events and any time they encounter children in their communities. A template is available on my website for additional departments anywhere to download and print their own cards to join TEAM BLUE BLAZE.



Thirdly, I have created a video about the importance of community policing and about this project. Plus, I have resources on my website to help teach others about community policing and how it is important for citizens and officers to communicate and have positive interactions.

Conclusion

Eighteen Madison Police officers received 250 trading cards. The cards are business card size so they are convenient to carry.

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. And, as mentioned above, additional officers have requested to have cards made and many of the first 18 asked for reprints. 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.



I worked on this project through the spring and summer of 2019. Cards were in the hands of 18 officers by September 18, 2019. At the completion of paperwork, I will be ready to participate in the April 2020 ceremony.

This has been such a fun project for me. I was able to learn a little about graphics design, webpage design, photography, preparing files for printing, and how to interview people and how to be interviewed. I had a chance to talk with a mayor, a chief of police, a city council and work with a police department and its officers. I have answered emails from news reporters and been interviewed by news reporters. 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. I have had a lot of great feedback about the cards. I've had a couple of kids that I know send me pictures where they had received a card and loved it. 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.