



WYLIE POLICE DEPARTMENT'S YOUTH PROGRAM PROVIDES DIFFERENT PATH

By **Judy Truesdell**, Communications Specialist, City of Wylie

'Respect, Responsibility, No Excuses'

Sarah Purcell knew that, if she had approached the police officers in person, she would have cried.

So she sent an email, telling the Wylie Police Department what its Youth Enrichment Program (YEP) meant to her son Gino. "You were able to show Gino the joy of helping others, and you taught him things about making the right decisions that he will carry with him always."

Wylie's YEP is a two-week summer program for kids ages 13-15 who have been identified by their school resource officers (SRO) as being "at risk" or "needing a little more direction." During their nine-hour days, the youngsters participate in a program that includes physical fitness; community service; respect of self and others; tobacco, drug, and alcohol awareness; and teen pregnancy education. They're supervised at a ratio of one SRO per two kids in this program, which just completed its 10th year.

Identifying Participants

"We want to have a good group that will really benefit from our program," said Officer Natalie Freeman, one of the SROs involved in YEP. SROs communicate with each other throughout the school year, identifying kids who would benefit from the program. They try to avoid allowing close friends or relatives to participate at the same time. Kids have an opportunity to interact with others they aren't normally around. "We don't want bad behaviors to feed off each other."

The officers contact the parents, some of whom are very excited about the opportunity while some are not. Parents are required to attend a meeting where the rules and expectations are explained, and one or two evening meetings during the camp. "This summer was the first year that 100 percent attended the parent meetings!" Freeman said, adding that this year's parental buy-in contributed to the success of the 2018 session.

What Goes on in YEP

On the back of their T-shirts is the camp motto: "Respect, Responsibility, No Excuses."

"We stress to the kids that they need to always be respectful to everyone, be responsible, and, when they do make a mistake, own it and don't make excuses for their actions," Freeman said.

The days begin with an hour-long workout at the recreation center or at a school track, then include a combination of community service, education, and fun, team-building activities.

Community service includes delivering Meals on Wheels, playing bingo with retirement community residents, participating in an abbreviated version of Wylie Fire Rescue's Citizens Fire Academy, and, one of the kids' favorites, a community service scavenger hunt. Teens are provided a list of tasks with points assigned to each, then divided into two groups with SROs driving them to perform the tasks, which they document with phone pictures.

Tasks include some fairly time-intensive chores like mowing yards, washing cars, picking up trash around town, and bathing dogs. The teens are also given simpler tasks like holding doors, watering houseplants, returning shopping baskets to stores, and reading to a child. "The kids and all the officers really had a blast with this, and it got very competitive!" Freeman said.

Trips to a local juvenile detention center and municipal juvenile court and a talk by a juvenile prosecutor provide a look at what could lie ahead, depending on their future decisions.

One of the more impactful speakers was Jason Hernandez, who was sentenced to life without parole for a nonviolent drug crime. He was in prison for more than 17 years, during which time his brother, also incarcerated, was murdered. Jason's

sentence was commuted by President Barack Obama, and his message about "second chances and how not everyone gets them" resonated with the young people, Freeman said.

They also heard from a young lady who lost a softball scholarship when she became pregnant. She told them how difficult life had been and described the struggles she faced. Freeman said this information was especially valuable to the female YEP participants, some of whom engaged in inappropriate texting practices or run away with older boys.

One of the more creatively presented sessions provided a lesson in etiquette. Julie Black, a counselor at Wylie High School, entered the library meeting room where the kids gathered. She was five minutes late, was on her phone, had headphones on, and was wearing sweats. After giving the teens time to absorb how she presented herself, she shed the sweats and spoke about proper attire and ways of behaving to present oneself in the best possible light. She talked about the proper way to set a table, correct silverware to use for each course, and other manners. They cooked a lasagna lunch, and while they ate it, each teen was given a notecard with a task, such as to burp and say "excuse me" or ask permission to leave the room to go to the restroom.

Freeman realized early on that a long, all-indoor day of activities left kids fidgeting and stir crazy, leading to acting out behaviors. So, although each day brought a mix of volunteerism and education, it also included enjoyable activities such as an escape room visit, bowling, a movie, fishing, a yogurt shop trip, or an afternoon of team building, where kids experienced rope courses, team games, inflatables, and archery with foam-tipped arrows.





Positive Effects

Mrs. Purcell's son Gino Schaffer, now a freshman at Wylie East High School, is making A's and B's and is playing football.

She said when she originally signed Gino up for the program, she just needed "something for him to do for a couple weeks out of the summer to keep him out of trouble." She knew what the program was about, but with his "really bad behavior at the time and his 'I-don't-care' attitude, I wasn't sure he was going to get anything out of it," she recalled.

"I truly believe that this program led him on a path that he is continuing to follow. Yes, we still have issues with him, but it is nothing like before. He now seems to care about the rules and why we set them. He makes sure he knows what his schedule is every day between football and homework and checks his grades regularly, whereas before, he didn't do half his work on time and didn't care."

She said Gino has gained respect for police officers and has a "good and trusting" relationship with his stepfather now. "I know some of that has to do with maturity, but this program started it." Whether through a football scholarship or his stepfather's military benefits, Gino is looking ahead to attending college.

Gino said that, at the beginning of the camp, his attitude was, "I've got to go do this." At the end of the summer, however, he felt like "Alright, I get to go do this today."

He said when it was all over, he "kinda wanted it to keep going." He initially signed up to take care of some community service hours he owed. He now says he wants to thank his SRO Mike Hashimoto for giving him the opportunity.

"These kids get lost, for whatever reason. Home, early childhood trauma, living in a bad neighborhood, or just something not firing right in their brains yet," Mrs. Purcell said. "They may not know it and



may seem ungrateful, but they all want to do better." Brandon McGary, also a freshman at Wylie East High School, asked for and was given permission to take the program twice. He said at first, he felt like he needed to act tough and cool, trying to impress the younger kids. But as he became better acquainted with the police officers, whom he called "fun and chill," he realized that he should just be nice. "I realized y'all hadn't done anything to me," he said. "There was no reason to be rude."

Freeman said that Brandon changed dramatically from the surly youngster with not much to say to the outgoing, well-spoken young man he is today who communicates well with adults and is a pleasure to be around. "He has improved tremendously," she said. Brandon is taking business and finance courses and would like a career in the medical field.

And why did he make that step up? "They [the SROs] had shown me I was doing wrong. I wanted to improve myself," Brandon said.

"Although the camp is only two weeks long, it can be an impactful two weeks," Freeman said. "It's our chance to touch these young lives. We stay in touch with the kids and, when we see them doing well in school and thinking about the future, it's our greatest reward." ★

