

Salvation Army Boys and Girls Club holds workshop with Durham police

By Amber Younger
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With a warm smile, James Johnson reaches for a handshake.

“What did we learn?” he asks. “Good! Eye contact.”

At the Salvation Army Boys and Girls Club of Durham, which is located at 810 N. Alston St., Johnson strives to create an atmosphere of respect. He wants the children, many of whom are underprivileged, to feel valuable and said poverty is not predominantly a lack of material goods, but a lack of relationships.

The Durham Police Department and the Club believe one relationship that is lacking is the one between children and police officers. On Jan. 13, police officers Michael Bonfiglio, Kristian Wheeler, Keith Crews and Everette Jefferies as well as investigator Thomas Scozzafava arrived at the Club to hold the first positive police interaction workshop.

Through hypothetical situations and Q&A sessions, the children were able to think through respectful interactions with police officers.

Approximately 15 children between the ages of 10 and 12 were present for the workshop, where they were taught not to be afraid of the police.

In 2014, Durham became the center of protests in North Carolina due to race relations. Following the death of a 17-year-old in the back of a police car, marches occurred in Durham in January and February. And after a grand jury announced in November that Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson would not be indicted for the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown, protests occurred again.

Children witnessed many of



Salvation Army Boys and Girls Club Executive Director James Johnson, right, shows children a scrapbook. He hopes the workshop helps build relationships between children and police. (Staff photo by Amber Younger)

these demonstrations. Others learned about it on the news.

“We really want to evaluate where children are and meet them there,” Johnson said.

After talking with the officers, one boy realized police officers can be afraid, too. He decided he wants to solve crime when he grows up.

“I’ve always wanted to be a cop,” Wheeler said. “It does make me feel good that I’m making somewhat of a difference – a small dent.”

The workshop is not the only way the District 1 police unit is investing in the community’s children. More than 500 children have participated in the Durham Police Athletic League (PAL), in which officers build relationships with children by coaching basketball, soccer and baseball teams.

“We try to stay visible,” Jefferies said. “Our vision is to try to get the crime rate down.”

The Club wants to be a part of that. As most assaults are gang-related, and children tend to join gangs around the ages of 12 and 13, the target workshop age group is 10

to 12-year-olds. Officer Crews hopes the workshop helps children understand who the police are and where they come from.

“We wanted to make children see them as human,” said Johnson, who was a New York City police officer for more than 20 years.

The skills Johnson developed as an officer prepared him for his role at the Club. While he was with the NYPD, he started a chapter of Law Enforcement Explorers, a program designed to build relationships between police officers and teenagers. The chapter reached over 3,000 children.

Growing up in the high-crime area he worked in, Johnson developed an understanding of what young people from such areas go through.

He said children fear police officers because they lack relationships, which can open doors for mentorship.

“The value of being a prince is to learn what kings do,” he said.

“Man means responsibility. Who is a better example than law enforcement?”