

COMMUNITY NEWS

A valuable resource

Resource officer recognized as Police Officer of the Year for community involvement and reaching out to others with the Help Families in Need program

By Charlotte Beard

"If you ever lose your compassion for what you're doing and the people you're helping, you're no longer doing yourself a service or the people that you serve. It's time to look for another job."

Those were the words that Hazelwood Officer Timothy Benning recalled from one of his mentors when he started out as a young officer for Jennings. As of Jan. 16, the St. Louis native has served as a police officer for 36 years. Benning began his service in law enforcement in 1982 and has spent the last 30 years serving Hazelwood.

Benning, who was awarded a Police Officer of the Year Award by the Florissant Rotary Club in December 2018, shares what it means for him to serve the community, particularly as a school resource officer for Hazelwood West Middle School.

"I've always been interested in working with kids. When I first started in law enforcement my goal was to be a juvenile detective. That's what I wanted to do. When you work for a small department you don't have the opportunities like you would if you worked in St. Louis County or St. Louis City where you have a 1,000-man department. So, when opportunities present themselves you take advantage of them. I had worked undercover in narcotics, I had worked as a detective and I had worked as a field training officer. When this new position came up in 1997, I really believed in it. I believe that you need to make connections with your community. You need to let people know you're involved, you're just not someone that shows up and drives around in a car for eight hours and then goes home. So, I thought that the school resource officer position was a great opportunity to be able to build those bridges and make those



Hazelwood Officer Timothy Benning has spent the last 30 years serving Hazelwood.

Photo courtesy city of Hazelwood

connections."

Benning applied and received the position. He shared that Hazelwood was one of the first police departments along with St. Louis County to have a school resource officer program. He served as a resource officer from 1997 to 2002 before transitioning to the detective bureau for a while.

"There weren't many departments that were involved. I got the position, I went through the training. I just saw it as a really good thing to work with the kids and to be a positive role model (to) build some relationships with people – something that's going to last."

He returned to the resource officer role in 2008. The greatest impact he believes he has had as a resource officer is making a positive impact on how youth view law enforcement.

"I didn't plan on being there 10 years, I thought I would be there another five years and go back to the road, but it just seemed like

it was my calling. I was making the biggest difference by staying there and doing that. I think I built that trust to help serve our community better. When you work with someone day after day after day, you're able to change someone's life. So, when a kid comes up to me and says, 'Hey Officer Benning, I just want to let you know because of what you did and the time you took talking with me it really made a difference and I just want to thank you,' that is the biggest (compliment) someone can get, just to know that they changed somebody's life for the better."

The thirty-six-year law enforcement veteran, who has announced his plans to retire this year, is not only leaving a legacy with youth but also with families. He shared that as a young officer he saw other officers who during a call would go to a house and find it

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‘RESOURCE’ from cover

without heat during the cold temperatures and resort to privately paying the gas bill or providing blankets and space heaters out-of-pocket.

“You’re not able to do enough but you’re able to make a little bit of a difference,” shared Benning. “So, when I came into Hazelwood one of the reasons that brought me there was that Chief Carl Wolf was there at the time. He was one of the leaders in St. Louis Metropolitan area that believed in community policing. He built the concept of the police department on community policing that at that time was pretty much unheard of. You didn’t hear that terminology. He wanted his men and women not just to respond to a call. If you responded to a call and it took you an hour to help solve the problem, then you ‘stayed there’ an hour to help solve the problem. He wanted to bridge that gap between the community and law enforcement. I thought that was important because of the way I was trained as a younger officer in Jennings.”

During the Christmas season of 1994 he was part of a call to a residence that included an additional family due to loss of their home which resulted in some household tensions. Benning suggested to other officers that they work together to provide some needs to the family to help better their experience during the holiday. The department ended up adopting three additional families for Christmas of 1994.

“I went to the chief and I said, ‘This seemed to work out really (well) this year. Would this be something that we could start as a project within the department?’ He said, ‘Tim, if this is something you want to undertake, I will support you 100 percent. I know you worked with the (association) this year. How about making this a community program through our police association and use them for support?’”

The Hazelwood Police Department’s Benevolent Association that was originally set up to primarily assist officers in need as well as the department’s civilian employees, functions year-round. In its bylaws there are stipulations that allow the association to provide some support to family needs within the community.

The association agreed to become a partner in the Christmas initiative which became the Help Families in Need program. In 1995 the initiative served seven families and has grown in service yearly. Under the guidance of Benning, the program has served over 300 Hazelwood families to date. This year, 14 families were sponsored due to families being adopted by bioMerieux, Bommarito Ford Superstore, Nature’s Bakery, Burner Design & Control, and the Hazelwood Police Department. In addition, students of McCurdy Elementary School (Florissant) held a gift drive and donated approximately 50 gifts for the families, and city employees and residents made generous contributions towards the families.

The program utilizes information from a domestic violence and victims advocate to determine the individuals that will be assisted through the program each year. Other referrals may also come through the department’s chaplains, churches, or other community resources.

When Benning became an officer in Jennings, he had two mentors there. He credits them both in ensuring he understood the need to build bridges in the community and that his service as officer was not just a job.

“Their philosophy and their guidance (somewhat) taught me that,” stated Benning. “(Also) I was with some policemen that don’t like a lot of attention, they don’t like to be singled out. They don’t do it for the praise or recognition.”

COMMUNITY NEWS

COMMUNITY VOICES

Celebrating the Summons of Joy Program

By Dr. Rance Thomas

North County Churches Uniting for Racial Harmony and Justice's Summons of Joy Program kicked off its fourth year last month. This program was implemented four years ago as part of a program to improve the relations between the police and the community.

It involves some of our North County Churches Uniting for Racial Harmony and Justice's (NCCU) churches in Florissant donating funds to NCCU during the Christmas season, and NCCU buys hundred dollar gift certificates. These certificates are then given to the Florissant Police Department to give to individuals they stop during the Christmas season for minor violations. They give the certificates to those who appear to have a financial need rather than give them tickets. The first year we gave the department 42 one hundred dollar gift certificates, 76 the second year, 98 last year and 64 this year. Instead of just giving them warnings, they give each one a hundred dollar gift certificate as well. During these years our churches have donated more than \$27,000 to support this program.

This program began as part of NCCU's effort for the police and the community to work together and build better relations with one another. After the Michael Brown shooting and during the riots in Ferguson, NCCU held a number of community forums in North County and brought together the mayors, police, pastors and community leaders throughout North County in an effort to help calm the situation down in North County. We even had members of the Alton, Illinois police department and the Madison County Sheriff department participate. The Alton Police Department still participates in our work and has even implemented a similar program but on a smaller scale.

After we met for a number of times, we decided to form the Discussion and Solutions Committee to work together to explore ways in which we could calm our communities down and improve the relations between the police and the community. Out of this committee one of our members, Rev. John Higgins, Pastor of John Knox Presbyterian Church in Florissant brought to our attention a similar program that existed in Kansas City. It was a program that helped improve the relations between the police and the community; therefore with the approval of NCCU, we adopted it.

Our Summons of Joy Program has received a warm reception from individuals who receive the gift certificates and the larger community. In fact, many who receive the certificates hug all police officers in sight, others give officers big thank yous and some even breakdown and sob. The police officers

love the program, because they have never received so much positive response from the community. This program is spreading to other parts of the country as well. I shared an article on this program with the President of the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary during an annual meeting of the Presidents Roundtable. He had copies made and shared them with approximately 40 attendees from around the country who received the information very favorably. I had to answer many questions concerning this program at this meeting. In fact, one of the many pastors present told me that he was going to share this program with the mayor in his hometown in Alabama and ask him to implement a similar program.

Our Discussion and Solutions Committee consists of four police departments and the St. Louis County Police Department North precinct. The departments include the Florissant, Hazelwood, Clayton and Alton police departments, three pastors, the superintendent and the director of communications of Hazelwood School District, a representative of Ferguson-Florissant School District and several community leaders.

We have been working to bring the churches, schools, and community together around some positive activities since 2014. We have brought several mediation and reconciliation groups to help us, one from California and the other from St. Louis as well as representatives of the Police and Community Relation Organization from Washington, D.C. to work with us. Based upon our work, we have had several police departments increase their diversity, attend more community events, visit some of our churches, organized athletic leagues for youth, implement coffee with cops programs, participate in school activities and have begun to communicate with citizens in times other than at times of trouble. Since various organizations and the police have been working together several departments have had their officers undergo police community relations training.

Of course there is still work to be done, but we have been very pleased with our progress.

Dr. Rance Thomas is Professor Emeritus of Sociology/Criminal Justice and co-founder and President of North County Churches Uniting for Racial Harmony and Justice.



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