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MEDIA RELEASE

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Teaching Students How to Recognize and Resist Gangs

by

Lt. Kathleen Carey, PIO

Corporal Daniel Clinard quickly introduced himself to a classroom full of fifth graders as he handed out teaching materials titled "Reducing Gangs in Virginia." Clinard is one of several deputies with the Newport News Sheriff's Office who are instructing students about making choices.

We make them all the time. And choices have consequences. Positive or negative.

Attorney General Bob McDonnell asked the Newport News Sheriff's Office for help with his "Class Action" program, of which "Reducing Gangs" is a part. McDonnell recognized the value of the Sheriff's Office when it comes to teaching young people about consequences. After all, the Newport News City Jail is full of people who have made bad choices. The severity of crimes varies a great deal. Bottom line, however, breaking the law is a choice that can cost you your freedom.

The Class Action curriculum teaches the importance of choosing the right friends and how that decision can play into a child's future.

Deputies were trained and certified by the Attorney General's Office to teach 4th and 5th graders. The expanded gang resistance portion of Class Action was launched as a pilot program in the 2006/2007 school year. Sheriff Gabe Morgan is energized by this program. He believes it will make a positive difference in the lives of children. "We want to take this to every elementary school in Newport News," said Morgan. That will mean expanding from the six schools covered in the pilot program to a total of 26 schools.

Deputies with the Newport News Sheriff's Office combine teaching with their daily duties. For example, Clinard is assigned to the civil enforcement division of the Sheriff's Office. Other deputies provide courtroom security. Still others are assigned to the corrections side of the house.

At South Morrison Elementary School, Corporal Clinard got the students to participate right away. He had a natural ease when interacting with the kids. "I remember being in 5th grade," he related. "I remember it well. You know why? Because that was the first year I got real football pads." And with that, this man, who must look like a giant to these ten-year olds, got their attention.

The boys and girls saw past the corporal's imposing stature and beyond his full uniform. They saw a guy who was once a kid just like them. Immediately, they trusted him enough to listen.

"Cool. I think it's cool," said Christopher Adams about having a deputy sheriff teaching a class. Teacher Reggie Barnes agreed, "These days, kids are exposed to things through music and TV. I think it's important they hear the other side. Certain things get glamorized (in pop culture). They get to hear the consequences of their behavior. They need to hear about the outcome of their actions."

Gangs are recruiting younger and younger. It is up to law enforcement to try and counter their efforts. The Class Action workbook is easy to follow. Lessons are taught mostly in a storybook style with review exercises to follow.

The lesson plan also breaks down what Virginia Law has to say about street gangs, bullying, and tattooing. "Curse words. I didn't know cussing was against the law," exclaimed Shania Vanbeverhoudt. Corporal Clinard explained how any person, including a minor, who curses, or uses abusive language toward another person, can be found guilty of a Class 3 Misdemeanor. That is considered bullying. "It is a chargeable offense," said Clinard. "Will you get jail time?" he continued. "No. Can you be fined? Can the judge get in your pocket? Sure. The judge may give you a \$250 fine plus court costs."

Tagging or graffiti doesn't necessarily mean gang activity. At the very least, it is vandalism. Students learn it is against the law to damage property. They also learn that their parents can be ordered to pay a fine up to \$2,500.

Graffiti is only one type of writing popular with gang members. Several students said they know there are gangs in their Newport News neighborhood. How? "I see them writing," chimed Chory Foster. "Writing" is slang. Foster knows it, "They put up signs with their fingers to represent."

Class Action is more than teaching kids how to recognize gangs. Clearly, many already know how to do that. Class Action teaches kids how to resist gangs. That is the crucial message. Clinard emphasized choosing wisely. "Watch who you hang out with. Pick sports and things like that over picking fights. Be your own person," he said of leadership. "God gave each and every one of you a mind. Be the person you were created to be. Don't be a follower. Be a leader."

Every time Clinard leaves a classroom, he looks back at the students and hopes that he gave them something they can use down the road as they get older.

Sometimes there is no turning back from making a bad choice. Deputy Sheriff's have firsthand knowledge of what can happen.

Authorities in Newport News are investigating their city's 8th homicide of the year. Timothy Renato Franklin was released from jail on March 2nd and was dead by May 1st. Deputies heard Franklin describe himself as "invincible." He was no match for a drive-by shooting. Authorities say he suffered multiple gunshots to the chest.

Choosing friends. Choosing lifestyle. Choosing how to respond to conflict. Consequences are all too real.

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