Hidden Opportunities: The Lake County Police Explorers

By Rachel Rodriguez

Over the years I have taken an interest in multiple groups that I believe have made me a better person. These groups range from school groups, such as Spanish Club, to groups that perform community services. Of these groups, I hold the Lake County Police Explorer Post closest to my heart. The explorer post is a program for teenagers who express an interest in law enforcement. In this program, they are given an opportunity to learn what police officers, crime scene detectives, hostage negotiators, etc. go through in their daily experiences. Unfortunately, some officers think of this program and its members as a nuisance. Whether it’s teaching or just putting up with us at an event, they do not want anything to do with the explorers. I believe it is not right for the officers to try to prevent someone from reaching their goal. There are so many more opportunities for us Explorers in the Lake County Police Department if we would only be given the chance.

The Lake County Explorer program has helped many people realize whether or not law enforcement is right for them. We train in hostage negotiation, crime scene, white collar crime, shoot-don’t-shoot, arrest and search, burglary in progress, traffic stop, first-aid, crime prevention, bomb threat, and domestic disturbance. It takes about a year to really get to know these scenarios like the back of your hand. During the summer of every other year, there is a National Police Exploring Conference held at a chosen campus in order to allow the different explorer posts to have their teams compete against the other posts in the scenarios. However, the posts’ teams do not know which of the scenarios they will be competing in until the actual competing time is there; therefore, the teams must be ready to compete in any one of the eleven scenarios.
In hostage negotiation, the team is taken to a room where all there is only a desk and a telephone. One person, the primary speaker, talks on the phone with someone who is going to commit suicide, is holding hostages, is going to kill someone, or is going to do anything else along those lines. The rest of the team is writing everything down that the primary speaker is mirroring. Mirroring is a procedure that involves the speaker repeating things, which the other person on the phone is saying, in a way so that it is not obvious that the speaker is really telling his team what the conversation is about. While this conversation is taking place, the primary speaker's team is trying to give the primary speaker different ideas that might convince the hostage taker, or suicidal person, to surrender to the cops.

In traffic stop, the team is taken out to a parking lot where there is a regular car parked and a police car parked right behind it; this is how one usually sees a traffic stop on the streets. The team members have to call in to dispatch correctly, approach the vehicle correctly, and have control of the conversation with the driver. Once the explorers have the driver's license and registration, one team member needs to call it in to see if it is a stolen vehicle or if the driver has a warrant. While this is happening, the other team members are keeping an eye on the vehicle and the driver. The car always comes back as stolen, and the driver always has a warrant out for his arrest. At this point, the team has to work together to command the driver out of the vehicle with his hands in the air. Then, the explorers command the driver to walk closer to them. Once the driver is close enough, the explorers arrest and search him. The scenario is then over.

The rest of the scenarios are just as detailed as the hostage negotiation and traffic stop scenarios. They are setup to be like the real thing. However, our “criminals” are part of the FBI, DEA, and other agencies. Even though this time is always very stressful, my explorer post, out of the hundreds that compete, has proven to be successful in bringing third place trophies, or higher,
home for every scenario that we compete in. Being the only team in any post from Indiana to bring home a trophy is well worth the stress.

Besides the thrill of winning a trophy, the training's main purpose is to allow the explorers to have a little bit of a feel for the different types of jobs that are available in law enforcement. I have been in this program for five years and have known many people who wanted to become patrol officers, lawyers, detectives, and many more. I myself have started as a cadet, the lowest rank, not knowing what I wanted to do as a career, and am now the chief, the highest rank, and know exactly what I want to do. Through the explorer post people are given a chance to meet others who express their interest and a head start on their career choice.

The Lake County Explorer Post has also helped the community as much as it has helped its post members. Each year we have many community service events, but the ones that really stick out are the Thanksgiving soup kitchens, Shop with a Cop, and Back to School. The soup kitchens are always a lot of fun. We meet friendly people and serve them a great Thanksgiving meal. On their way out, we hand them bags of gloves, hats, food, and toiletries. Everyone gets along very well. At shop with a Cop, we explorers go to Meijer with kids, whose parents could not afford Christmas gifts, and buy the kids toys and clothes. At the Back to School event, the Lake County Police Department holds an event where kids can get ready for school. The kids receive free school supplies, backpacks, haircuts, food, and other little fun things. During the event, the children are also taught about stranger safety, safety around the house, and other good tips to know. We help by being the leaders of the many groups of kids to lead them from one stop to the next. It is always very fun to be with the kids and talk about school, the next new movie that is about to come out, or anything else.
With all of these great effects that the post has on people, one would think that the department is all for it; however, there are many people who do not think there should even be a post. Sheriff Roy Domíquez has always supported us in everything that we have wanted to accomplish because he too was once a police explorer. It is the officers who do not want us around. Our advisor, Officer Chris Poe, has tried to show us a variety of things, but there is only so much that he knows. He is a S.W.A.T. member, a patrol officer, and belongs to other programs, but there should be someone from the other sections who are willing to show us the basics. The officers who do like having us around are the ones who actually took time to get to know us, but most do not even try because they think that we are a big pain.

We were promised many times that we were going to go on ride-alongs, help out in the dispatch section, help at the front desk, and help out in other sections of the department; however, none of the officers want to “baby-sit some kids who are police wannabes”. I want the program to expand, but how can this happen if none of the other officers are willing to teach us? Most of them are rude or complain about their jobs.

I can remember many times when the officers were rude to us, but I will only tell of one incident in particular that had really upset me. On the day that we were going to be allowed inside the Lake County Crime Lab for the first time, everyone in the post was really excited and could barely stand still. We were supposed to be shown, by an officer who works there, the different rooms and instruments used during an investigation, but the only room we were shown was the basement. The officer said that he did “not have the time nor the patience to baby-sit kids who think they’re cops”. In the basement, he made us build shelves to keep boxes of film negatives on. Then, he made us move the hundreds of boxes from upstairs to the basement,
placing them on the shelves in numerical order. I could not believe that this officer was actually
telling us to do this, but we had to be professional and do as we were told.

As the chief of the Lake County Police Explorer Post, I am going to write to the chief of
the Lake County Police Department about the situation. He is the one who would have the right
to say what we can and cannot do with the officers. I believe that if I am able to convince him
that we do deserve to have a little look and practice in each of the sections, then he would be able
to convince the other officers that we are not as bad as they depict us to be. We are not asking for
them to be something that they are not used to, but we are only asking to be able to watch them
do their job that they do everyday.

I am not sure if all of the officers were given the opportunity that we are being given as
being part of the post, but I would not see why they would not want their field to expand. We
only want a chance to do what we love: learning about law enforcement and helping others in
need. I hope they will realize this and become a big part in helping us reach our goals by giving
us those hidden opportunities.