



David Perez: Poor Providence children crave guidance

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According to federal government statistics, the Community Disadvantage Index for Hartford Park in Providence is a 10 out of 10. The index indicates a high percentage of people living below the poverty line and receiving public assistance, and a high percentage of single-mother households. Ten is the highest number a community can receive. The child poverty rate is 50 percent, according to the 2010 census.

The young people who live there have tremendous potential and harbor the same aspirations as all kids, but one would expect little hope for those at the Hartford Park Housing Development to achieve college or career. With very few examples of success, they are very often not aware of the pathway to make it.

One program is determined to bring hope to this neighborhood, where many children have never traveled outside of their community. The Safe Haven Police Mini-Station, run by the Providence Housing Authority and Providence Police Housing Unit, replicates a program by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, from which it gets funding.

I am a Providence police officer with the Housing Unit. I believe that keeping communities safe takes many approaches. Taking drugs and guns off the street is important, but being involved in young people's lives is just as critical. At the Safe Haven, we engage children through mentoring. We push for parent participation, without which success is difficult.

Every gun taken off the street is an instant contribution to our safety, while mentoring is a long-term investment. Studies show that children engaged in these programs are much less likely to end up in the criminal-justice system.

The Safe Haven provides homework help, art, sports activities and guidance during those after-school hours when research shows children are more likely to get in trouble.

One young man I met brought to mind the Winnie-the-Pooh character Eeyore. He had his head down, and seemed isolated and depressed. When I first met this 12-year-old, he couldn't look me in the eye and when we shook hands he barely gripped my hand.

I began talking with him, letting him know that I cared. It turned out that he lived with his little brothers in a single-parent household that was struggling with poverty and other challenges. He was bullied at school and thought little of himself. His pain was palpable.

I did not want him to accept the victimization of the bully. I encouraged him to hold himself high and carry himself with pride, using essentially the old adage "fake it until you make it." I taught him: Even if at first the behavior feels odd, once you start standing up for yourself, carrying yourself like a gentleman by being assertive, treating

yourself and others with respect, and looking people in the eye, you would elicit a different response and develop a sense of self-worth that becomes your new reality.

Eventually, he approached his bully, looked him in the eyes and verbally confronted him. He reasoned with him, asking him how would he like being bullied. He didn't back down. Surprisingly, now he and his former bully are good friends. He learned that he had the power to change his circumstances.

At our last encounter, he shook my hand firmly and looked me in the eyes when we spoke. He hasn't had any behavioral problems at school since then, he is helpful at home, and the women at the center report that he is respectful with the girls, even running to open the door for them. He's recently expressed to me that he would like to join law enforcement.

In the communities where I have worked, I see that the relationship with the police is too often one of tension. The Safe Haven attempts to turn that around by creating trust where there is suspicion or hostility.

I try to carry that out in my work in the housing developments as well. We are always looking for ways to expose the youth to a more expansive world. For example, there are no skate parks here. So we've given out skateboards to offer young people an easily accessible sport that inspires them to travel to a skate park outside of the development, where we hope they will be introduced to other kids and discover new and positive experiences.

I don't know if my young friend who once reminded me of Eeyore would have been one whose depression, isolation, and anger would have caused him to act out violently or not. What I believe is that a little support and care helped ensure that he is on the pathway to becoming a good student, a responsible human being and most importantly someone who believes in himself and his future.

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