

Tales of Two Summers



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Another summer is flying by! No sooner had our last column sharing summer projects funded by our Community Grants program hit the press than I was inundated with messages from charities starting their "Back to School" campaigns.

One of these was from Start Off Smart (SOS), which works in partnership with the Homestead Police Department. On a Saturday in August they will distribute 1,000 book bags with school supplies to children from low income families who attend the Police Athletic League (PAL) and other youth programs in the surrounding crime-plagued West Homestead neighborhood. Whole families will come out to enjoy the bounce house, obstacle course, water slide, Black Hawk helicopter, K-9 and SWAT demonstrations, snow cones, popcorn, hamburgers and hot dogs and plenty of water. Twenty different agencies will provide educational information and health screenings to families. An Ocean Reef grant is providing funding for this event and six more over a year.

Most importantly, according to SOS Co-Director Sandi Nanni, together "we are providing opportunities to engage law enforcement and youth in a fun, relaxed atmosphere that will inspire more trust and cooperation. Today's youth need to know that law enforcement is there for them, not against them."

The catalyst for this collaboration was the series of events last summer that came to a head on July 7 with the ambush



Homestead Police Department Police Athletic League's Officer Robbie Tate and Alisha Wiggins receive a grant to Start Off Smart for PAL programs flanked by Grants Committee member Kathie Markel (far left) and Chair Janie Sims (far right).

of 12 police officers in Dallas amid protests of police involved shootings around the country. Like most Americans I watched in horror and felt completely powerless. The issues involved are huge and overwhelming. Daunted, I reminded myself that I have the privilege of working for a foundation on behalf of a community that empowers change, and refocused on what *could* be done.

Our work with youth offered the best chance for change aligning with the priorities of our grants program. Reaching out to heads of youth programs in Homestead, all were feeling the same despair and searching for a way to address recent events and underlying issues with the kids they serve. The Foundation had just made our first grant to SOS, which sends case managers out with HPD on domestic violence calls and shepherds primary victims to safety and independence, to provide counseling programs for the victims' children for the first time. The grant was helping to transform a little used PAL gym into a hub of neighborhood activity.

In the month leading up to our application deadline we gathered leaders of youth programs with SOS and PAL Officer Robbie Tate, formerly a community policing officer, around a table at the PAL gym with a simple goal of increasing

positive communications and interactions between local kids and police. Many new connections and great ideas came from that meeting. These include the Foundation's help with a slate of community events coordinated by police, a youth leadership program at PAL and two police academy scholarships for local young people who will serve their hometown, and many others that cost little or nothing. This growing partnership group continues to meet quarterly.

It feels good to be able to report to Ocean Reef Members that we were actively supporting positive community-police relations well before the one-year mark of the violence in Dallas came around this summer. The first of the community events – a "Stop the Violence" day at Homestead Middle School – took place in late May at a crucial time when students were mourning the loss of a classmate to gun violence. Ocean Reef funding helped expand a fledging program offered to only a few classes in the past to the entire student body of 700 students. Multiple law enforcement agencies and community stakeholders came together to combine exciting outdoor activities with a higher purpose. Inside officers sat down with kids in small groups (8-10) to talk about civilian-police relations and other topics

In August Start Off Smart will distribute 1,000 book bags with school supplies to children from low income families who attend the Police Athletic League (PAL) and other youth programs in the surrounding crime-plagued West Homestead neighborhood.

chosen by youth in the Homestead Police Explorers.

SOS Co-Director Debbie Lyew recalls, "While outside was fun and action packed, what was happening on the inside was the key. The children and officers were engulfed in deep conversations and several times we had to stop the conversation due to time constraints. The feedback was very positive." The Foundation had a similar response to our Charity Tour visit to PAL last February. It was hard to get our group of members on to the next stop, they were so impressed with the officers who presented the projects and gave them unanimous, enthusiastic approval.

Have we solved one of the nation's most weighty problems in the span of two summers? Of course not, but we've made a start close to home. If there's anything working for the Foundation has taught me, no matter how big the problem, there is always a way to make a difference in your own backyard. There's hope in that. We're a nation made up of backyards, after all.