

*"Youth Intervention and
Education Project"⁷⁷*



Herman Goldstein Award

Mesquite Notice Department

Nomination Form

1998 HERMAN GOLDSTEIN AWARD
Nomination
Abstract
For The
Mesquite Police Department's
"Youth Intervention and Education Project"

The *"Youth Intervention and Education Project"* is unique because there is no other program in existence like it. It consists of three segments or tiers. Tier one is the **Slama Bama Jama**, anti-gang, anti-drug, and anti-violence program. Tier two is the **Evening Out With A Cop** program. And the third tier is the **Ropes Challenge Adventure Course**. All of the programs include positive messages and interaction between police officers and the youth. The measure of success is not only gauged by a reduction in offenses, but through its wide acceptance among students and the community. Their enthusiastic participation and praise heighten the student involvement by peer students.

The youth members of the Youth Service Advisory Committee (a committee devoted to youth concerns and development of initiatives to answer those concerns) stated they felt that anytime a police officer came onto the school campus, it had a negative connotation. The students came up with the idea of creating situations for positive police contact. Much of the project acts upon the belief that any measures helping to re-establish the self-image of these youth are beneficial. Leaders in the community have applauded its ingenuity and serious message with the highest praise. Students learn alternatives to drug abuse, alcohol and violence that will help maintain the student's individuality.

The project has generated interest outside of the City of Mesquite. Videotape presentations of the programs are produced by the Mesquite Police Department and sent free of charge to school districts and police departments around the country upon request.

The purpose of the *"Youth Intervention and Education Project"* is to gain positive relationships with the students. We believe our goal will be accomplished by providing positive role models, building and reinforcing self-esteem, promoting current and future education, and by relating to youth as partners in life and leaders of tomorrow.

This project does not stand alone in its results. The benefit of this project is illustrated by the fact that the total number of related offences in the city have continued to decrease by 31.81% since the program began. We believe that the goals and related drop in offenses can be linked to the aggressive and innovative way that the Mesquite Police Department looks at youth and their needs. We believe the *"Youth Intervention and Education Project"* can not be equaled in quality and service.

THE
1998 HERMAN GOLDSTEIN AWARD
for
Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing
Nominating

THE MESQUITE POLICE DEPARTMENT'S
"Youth Intervention and Education Project"

SCANNING:

In 1989, the City of Mesquite (population 105,000), and other Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex municipalities were being confronted with youth gang problems. With this becoming an area wide problem, the police chief decided to be among the first to publicly admit his city was suffering from this phenomenon. Understanding the situation, the chief of police, the city manager and the superintendent of schools called the community together to seek effective strategies for dealing with this threat.

City officials, educators, youth, neighborhood leaders, clergy, and members of the business community combined to form a Youth Services Advisory Committee. By brainstorming the specific problem at hand, one proposal came from the youth members serving on the committee that we feel confronts the problem, and is effective in dealing with gangs in Mesquite. This innovative project consists of three tiers. They are simultaneous in nature. The project is called the *"Youth Intervention and Education Project"*.

PROJECT GOALS:

- S Reduction of crime, specifically gang related.
- S Improve the quality of life for all citizens.
- S Increase citizen involvement in Crime Prevention efforts.
- S To involve youth in peer-pressure and self-esteem developmental programs,
- S To become a focal point through which other crime prevention programs could be developed and gain prompt acceptance.

Round table discussions were set up between middle and high school students, along with police officers to encourage open uninhibited communications. During the brainstorming sessions of this diverse group, the students on the panel expressed the desire for a better understanding and relationship between themselves and the police. One student stated that the presence of a police officer at school only meant there was trouble somewhere on campus.

By understanding the way school age youth perceive police, this could allow the committee to devise a plan that would eliminate false fears and perceptions, and cause a decline in gang offenses. Specific results of these meetings included the inception of three programs to deal with cultural

barriers, fear of violence, self-esteem, teamwork building and education. The three tiers to the program include **Slama Bama Jama**, **Evening Out With A Cop** and **Ropes Challenge Adventure Course**.

Slama Bama Jama, the top of the tier, is a high profile event developed in 1990, that conveys an anti-gang, anti-violence, anti-drug/alcohol message to the students through drama, by utilizing cultural symbols such as music and athletics. An anti-gang/violence message is acted out in skits by officers and high schools students. The program is presented for youth at all city middle schools. Police officers and selected high school student actors use highflying basketball stunts, contemporary music, smoke and lights, combined with drama, to convey a message of hope to the students in attendance.

After a review of the 1992 program (involving student suggestions) the idea of using a casket was conceived. Local businesses were instrumental in purchasing and donating the casket to the police department. A scenario of loud gun shots followed by a real casket being brought into the gym, with a student actor emerging from it, brings home through visual aid, the very real possibilities of gang involvement. In 1995, again in response to student suggestions, a jail (made of pipe) was added to illustrate the enforcement aspect of youth violence and gang activity. The casket along with the jail added an emotional punch to the program that students do not forget.

Area celebrities (usually news and sports television anchors or sports personalities) known to the youth round out the event by delivering hard-hitting motivational messages, usually sharing from their own personal life experiences. Some of the relationships established between our department and the celebrities have expanded as they participate with us on various community projects.

The City of Mesquite purchased baseball style trading cards for each officer participating in the program. Each card features the individual officer's picture with biographical data. The conclusion of the program offers the officers opportunity to reinforce their message with a more personal contact with each student.

The Youth Service Advisory Committee continually meets to evaluate and change or upgrade juvenile programming in Mesquite. Community response to the program has been outstanding. The relationship fostered between police and students as a result of this program can be exemplified in the following letter sent to the Police Department by a middle school student that learned from the message of the program:

*Dear Mesquite Police:
Thanks for coming to Agnew Jr. High. My favorite part (Slama Bama Jama) was about the gangster. That part was most like real life. It made me think of what I was going to do with my life. The basketball part made me think I could reach new heights if I just try hard enough. Thanks for everything.
(Signed) Jason Thomas*

Evening Out With A Cop, is the second tier of the "Youth Intervention and Education Project". This program consists of evenings where a balance of selected at-risk students and student leaders are given tours of the police department, then taken out to the City's rustic day camp. Students are

driven to the camp in the department's mobile command unit (RV) where they enjoy an evening meal, games, and discussions around a campfire at the day camp. This particular tier of the program was designed to allow middle school students the freedom to develop camaraderie with police officers, along with city and civic leaders of the community. One highlight of this particular tier is the first hand look into police work as the group follows calls dispatched to district patrol units. Participating in this portion of the *"Youth Intervention and Education Project"* allows the students the experience of seeing real life through the eyes of a police officer. The police department has expanded this program offering it to both high school and middle school students. We believe that both age groups can be effectively served through the same program.

The **Evening Out With A Cop** program was developed in 1991 at the request of officers, feeling they could have more of an impact on the students' lives if they participated one on one. **The Evening Out With A Cop** tier is a shorter version of the **Ropes Challenge Adventure Course**, described later. The program is flexible so that the needs of the students may be properly addressed. Requests to participate in both the **Evening Out With A Cop** and **Ropes Challenge Adventure Course** are plentiful, as parents, school counselors, and students themselves call to place their name on a waiting list.

The third tier of the *"Youth Intervention and Education Project"* is the **Ropes Challenge Adventure Course**, developed in 1992. Officers meet with selected students from area middle and high schools. The program usually begins on a Friday morning with students receiving a tour of the police department, (jail, communications, polygraph, criminal investigations, patrol, and court). Students are then picked up in the police department's mobile command unit (RV) and chauffeured along with officers, city and civic leaders to the city owned day camp site. Activities include basketball, volleyball, and various games. Friday evening meals are served by an open camp fire where the group can tell stories, sing songs or interact through topical discussions on any subject in a neutral, relaxed setting. A presentation is given by a motivational speaker on various topics, including anti-gang, anti-drug, and sexual responsibility.

Often the mayor and city council members will participate with the youth to show their support to them and the program. You just might see them pitching a tent, playing volleyball, throwing frisbees, singing, dancing, or just being involved in a one-on-one conversation with a student. On Saturday the real fun begins when the students, officers, and guests participate together in the ropes course. There are three courses by name are the "zip line," "pamper pole," and the "wall," which physically and mentally challenge all participants. These courses are non-discriminatory in nature and are designed to promote safety, teamwork, self-esteem, and build camaraderie among students and officers.

Participating officers are selected based upon interest in the program, their ability to relate to the youth, and their overall interpersonal skills. Youth Action Officers (gang unit), or (S.R.O.'s) School Resource Officers accompany the group.

Two categories of students are selected for tiers two and three of the program, role model students and youth at-risk. At-risk students are selected by school staff based upon their perceived level of being at-risk (at-risk being defined as the students demonstrating a tendency to engage in anti-social behavior or perceived susceptibility to anti-social influences). The role model students selected by

the schools represent, in theory, the opposite of the at-risk group.

The program is topped off with all the students participating in the program from past years being invited back for a grand party at the Mesquite Parks and Recreation Department's rustic day camp.

The evening at the camp consists of music with a D. J., Karaoke, cookouts, and again a ropes course, that most can't get enough of. A "dunking booth," that has been constructed by the city, is also used to add to the program excitement. Celebrities or motivational speakers also participate with a positive message for the youth to round out the night.

RESPONSE:

The focus of the "*Youth Intervention and Education Project*" is to establish a dialogue between students and police, and build a positive understanding between the two groups. Once these goals have been accomplished, the police officer can act as role model, informal counselor, and friend. The youth members of the Youth Advisory Committee stated they felt that anytime a police officer came onto a school campus, it had a negative connotation. The students came up with the idea of creating situations for positive police contact. Much of this process acts upon the belief that any measures helping to re-establish the self-image of these youth are beneficial.

The purpose of the "*Youth Intervention and Education Project*" is to gain positive relationships with the youth. By providing positive role models, building and reinforcing self-esteem, promoting current and future education, and by relating to youth as partners in life and leaders of tomorrow, our goal will be accomplished. Police officers are used due to their interest in helping people and their ability to bring mainstream values to the students participating in the program.

The "*Youth Intervention and Education Project*" is innovative because it is home grown, flexible, and pragmatic. During the initial search for strategy, no experts with hard solutions could be found. The community and city government had the self-confidence to draw upon local resources for answers.

This pro-active, one-of-a-kind project was developed to provide creativity and flexibility. Changes continue to be made to improve upon performance because the source and authority is local. The police department, community, youth, and school district, work as a "team" to build positive relationships for youth and thereby create a better Mesquite for all its citizens and surrounding communities.

ASSESSMENT:

Because of the nature of this non-traditional project, systematic evaluation will be hard to document. Until a framework of sorts is established, a more traditional evaluation will be sought. However, clinical or case-type observations have occurred. Based upon observations and reports from students, parents, school officials, and police officer participants, the program has far exceeded the intended goals to date without adverse or unexpected results. Officers are now being noticed by youth and are being reacted to in a positive way. The students retain the message because of the unique style used in the presentation.

Newspapers and local television programs, along with national video, media have helped to carry

our message of hope and help to others. Also, the projects have been documented by Ivanhoe Productions on "Crack Down," and shown on CNN and other national networks, which has resulted in requests from other communities for information on how to start these types of programs. This recognition has only helped to reinforce that the projects work. As an added bonus, in 1994 the City of Mesquite was awarded the International City Managers' Award. The Police Department was named "Outstanding Crime Prevention Agency of The Year" for the State of Texas in 1994. These awards were, in part, a result of these projects.

Another positive aspect coming from these projects is the creation of the S.R.O. (School Resource Officer) program within the high schools and middle schools in Mesquite. These positions were not created for the officers to become enforcers, but rather to work hand-in-hand with teachers and serve as positive role models for the students.

The "*Youth Intervention and Education Project*" is a catalyst to the decline of youth/gang activity in the City of Mesquite for the last six years, as well as the decrease in total number of offenses in the city since the inception of this project. The citizens of Mesquite were very proud to be listed the safest city in Texas, and among one of the 9 safest cities in the nation - according to a survey conducted for *Money* magazine.

DECLINE IN INCIDENTS PER YEAR
OFFENSES

1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
8,243	7,605	7,599	7,293	6,452	5,923

(Graph on preceding page)

The second and third tiers of the "*Youth Intervention and Education Project*" define clients differently than tier one. In the **Evening Out With A Cop** as well as the **Ropes Challenge Adventure Course** the participating students are those who have been informally defined as youth "at-risk," or role models as defined by school personnel.

Tier one **Slama Bama Jama** clients, are comprised of middle school students (7th and 8th grade peer-pressure age) with no designation between "at-risk," or role model. Annually, an estimated 400 students are served by the **Evening Out With a Cop**, and **Ropes Challenge Adventure Course** tiers, and approximately 14,000 students have been served by the **Slama Bama Jama** tier. The simultaneous programs serve close to 100% of the potential students targeted.

A specific budget for the "*Youth Intervention and Education Project*" does not exist. Personnel, materials, etc. have been funded from the operating budgets of various police department bureaus.

Sound equipment, trampolines, mats, and even the casket used in **Slama Bama Jama**, have been donated by the school district or concerned community sponsors. Most of the personnel involved participate during on duty hours (a highly sought assignment) as allowed by the department, or their

time is donated.

The "*Youth Intervention and Education Project*" is unique because there is no other program in existence like it. The measure of success is not only gauged by a reduction in offenses, but through its wide acceptance among students and the community. The student involvement is heightened by their enthusiastic participation and praise by peer students. Leaders in the community have applauded its ingenuity and serious message with the highest praise. Students learn alternatives to drug abuse and violence that will help maintain the student's individuality.

This project has been demonstrated to numerous school districts, because of the Texas Education Agency's Region 10-Educational Service Center's (state certification agency) pro-active endorsement. Videotape presentations of the programs are produced by the Mesquite Police Department and sent to school districts and police departments around the country, upon request. This project does not stand alone in its results. The goal of this project has more than been accomplished, and the total youth/gang related offenses in the city have continued to decrease since the program began. The City of Mesquite is a choice place to live, work, and play.

AGENCY AND OFFICER INFORMATION

As described earlier in the award nomination, the chief of police, and the superintendent of the Mesquite Independent School District, and the city manager decided to work together in a task of resolving youth problems. The situations that prompted the initial meetings came from gang activity, however all youth and their future was addressed at the same time. Once the Youth Service Advisory Committee began to meet, needs were seen and a plan was put into action. Once the Chief of Police described the situation and discussions of the Youth Service Advisory Committee to his command staff, words became projects and projects became realities.

Slama Bama Jama became the police department's answer to the gang problem. When patrol level officers were approached about this highly innovative problem, there were reservations. It was understood from the beginning that the program was for the youth of our city and would not be an overtime or part time job situation. Officers discovered, as they participated in the program and the students interacted with them at the conclusion of the program, that there was something special about the youth initiative.

Feeling that they needed more interactions with the students, the officers asked for a program that would allow more one on one time. The **Evening Out With A Cop** portion was born as a result of the original project. Once again officers expressed opinions concerning the programs thus far. And again, it was stated that more time was needed with the students. Good students and At-Risk students began to interact as desired, through these programs. How could we include more programs? The "*Youth Intervention and Education Project*" was conceived to incorporate the two programs and allow one more program that would be a spin off of the **Evening Out With A Cop**. The **Ropes Challenge Adventure Course** was designed to give officers even more exposure to the students.

To date, the three-tiered project has demonstrated itself as a positive program that works. Other than rehearsals for the **Slama Bama Jama** portion of the project, officers do not receive training. A heart felt concern and genuine compassion for the students are what keep the officers motivated to

participate. Even now, officers not associated with the project are requesting to be put on a waiting list for future admittance. No monetary incentive, just the thoughts of changing the way youth perceive officers.

During the initial Youth Services Advisory Committee meetings, there was no discussion of finances concerning youth programs. The police department decided to go out to the community and allow them to help with needed items. To date, there is still not a budget, nor do we expect one to be drafted. Any item that must be purchased for the project is either purchased from one of the police department division budgets, or provided by the business community. The City of Mesquite is a choice place to live, work, and play. Our statistics show Mesquite does live up to our motto:



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