

## Explorer scouts get chance to consider law enforcement careers

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Apr 9, 2004 : 6:32 pm ET

PITTSBORO -- High schoolers interested in law enforcement don't have to settle for watching TV shows and movies about police. They can actually train in Pittsboro through the Explorer program.

At weekly sessions at the Sheriff's Office, Chatham County teenagers get an up-close view of law enforcement careers. The program exposes the teens to various career options while offering them physical training, camaraderie and instruction on various techniques used in the field.

"We try to introduce them to as many different agencies as we can, so they can get an across-the-board view of law enforcement," said Deputy Jason Carter, who heads the program.

Carter said guest speakers at the Monday evening sessions have included agents from the State Bureau of Investigation and Alcohol Law Enforcement as well as state troopers. And they're working on bringing in an FBI agent, he said.

After listening to a speaker, Explorers move to the training part of the evening, where they learn techniques like self-defense and crime scene investigation.

Explorer Robby Clagg, a junior at Northwood High School, said the officers teach them to be observant and gather information. "They set up a crime scene based on an old past case that's been closed, and allow us to look at the evidence and see if we can figure out what happened."

Clagg said he first got involved because he likes military structure and the program lets him test out a potential career. "I've always wanted to go into the military, so it was just the closest thing that I could find to something like that," he said.

The program, which has been in place for a little more than a year in Chatham County, is under a branch of Boy Scouts of America called Learning for Life. Students pay \$8 per year to be involved in the group, which functions "more like a club," Carter said, because the training is ongoing.

Although the 15 members are from all three high schools in the county, they have formed friendships by being Explorers. "All of us can just come together and forget what school we're from," Clagg said.

Their bond is furthered by their dress code; the members are given a uniform to wear to each session. Consisting of a T-shirt, basic duty pants and black boots, the uniform doesn't seem to bother the Explorers.



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Sergeant Tony Wilson of the Chatham County Sheriff's Department inspects the uniforms of Chatham County Sheriff's Office Explorers Post 007 member on Monday, April 5. Members, who must be between 14 to 20 years old, meet every Monday at the Chatham County Sheriff's office in Pittsboro to learn about the different aspects of law enforcement.

"I like them," member Cory Roberson said of the uniforms. "It kind of expresses unity, so that makes us an even closer group."

Clagg said he loves the uniforms, because they add to the military structure he appreciates so much. "I don't mind wearing it at all, anywhere, anytime," he said. "I'll wear it to school."

While all the members are there by personal choice, Carter said they differ in enthusiasm levels. "We have some kids that're really bright and motivated and then we have some that're unmotivated," he said. "When we do recruiting we look for kids who are genuinely motivated and interested in law enforcement."

Officially, Carter and other deputies recruit with presentation boards and literature at the high schools, but unofficially, the members recruit their friends.

"I've gotten two of my friends to join," said Brian Phillips, also a Northwood junior, who's been with the program since it started. He said he was the one who got Clagg to join.

Explorers also raise interest in the group by occasionally wearing their gear to school. "People want to know what it is, what we do," said Clagg, adding that he thinks they recruited 10 new members in the last two months.

Phillips said the uniform also adds to his image in the high school. "It kind of shows a little bit of authority in school -- you go walking down the hall and you're like 'yeah.'"

That sense of authority, coupled with the glamour of constant action seen on TV, is why young people often become interested in law enforcement, Carter said. But the program is more of a hands-on look at reality.

"It dissolves some of the myths they might have about law enforcement," Carter said. "The television doesn't show you the heartache that's involved in the job, or the paperwork, for that matter."

Students are surprised by "how much more involved law enforcement actually is," he added.

The Explorers are not yet allowed to ride along with officers on duty, but an opportunity for that is under investigation, Carter said. In the meantime, Explorers get plenty of action with martial arts lessons and self-defense practice sessions.

Phillips said those activities, along with family tradition, were the reasons he got involved. "Being in the police force and going into the military kind of runs in the family," he said. "And they teach you how to fight."

Roberson said the practice time shows them how to handle various situations. "We go outside in front of the Sheriff's Office and we do PT (physical training) and then they'll demonstrate on one of us what the technique looks like and how it feels," he said.

Then the officers offer hints and tips while the Explorers practice on each other, Roberson added.

But he's never used one of the moves in real life. "We're not allowed, unless you're in a life-or-death situation, but not just on your friends at school," he said.

The Explorer program for law enforcement is available in other counties, and the Learning for Life organization also offers Explorer programs in other fields, such as aviation and fire rescue.

Carter said he suspects some of the Explorers will stick around and become law enforcement officers in Chatham County or elsewhere in North Carolina. But until then, this class gives them a good chance to learn about handcuff techniques, vehicle stops, building searches and other duties that go along with the job.

For one Explorer, the activities are fun but the value is deeper.

"People are always looking to get more money in life," Roberson said. "Going into law enforcement is not really about getting money. It's about helping people. That's why I got into it. I want to help people."