

WEST ROXBURY ~ ROSLINDALE BULLETIN

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FREE

Walking a mile in each others' shoes

Police plan 'Life Swap' with local teens

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Staff Reporter

District E-5 police are entertaining the idea of a "life swap" program to reach out to teenagers in West Roxbury and Roslindale.

If approved, the program would allow teenagers and policemen in the community to walk in one another's shoes for a day.

"We're doing our own little variation of reality TV," said Captain James Hasson.

In recent weeks, E-5 conducted a pilot for the program, in which Detective Larry Ellison and Hyde Park resident, Fabian Belgrave, 17, got to be a part of each others' lives for a day.

Both Ellison and Belgrave expressed enthusiasm after the experience.

"It couldn't have worked out better," said Ellison. "It has opened my eyes, and I'm a 23-year veteran. In my own routine, I'm usually looking at things through a law enforcement perspective, and I had a chance to look at it from a spectator's."

"At first, I was kind of like, 'Hey, I don't know how people are going to take it,' but in my heart I really wanted to do it," said Belgrave. "The crazy part about it was that, afterward, a lot of

people were giving me positive comments. A couple of boys were like, 'Oh, you can do that? You can hang with out with the police?'"

Boston Police are currently considering how to move forward.

"Anytime there's a positive effect, [authorities] will do everything they can to make it happen. They're still in the process of assessing the program, but happy with the results so far," said BPD spokesman Officer James Kenneally.

The idea for the program came out of a series of small-group meetings held this summer at Archdale Community Center called Youth-Police Dialogues, organized by CityWide Dialogues on Boston's Ethnic and Racial Diversity. E-5 police of every rank from patrolman to captain met with local Roslindale youth from the ages of 15 to 20 to discuss sensitive topics, such as stereotypes and snitching.

"There's a disconnect between teens and police and adults in terms of being able to communicate," said Detective Larry Ellison.

Twelve such Youth-Police dialogues have been held since 2004 to improve relationships between young people and the police, which had become sour in certain neighborhoods and were impeding police from having good relationships with the community.

"What we've seen in the course of the dialogues is that the kids start to see that some of the cops come from the same places they do or have had similar experiences," said Jeff Stone, director of CityWide Dialogues. "Police officers can reveal themselves as real hu-

man beings, and many of the youth start to see them as potential friends and allies, rather than as hostile people who just roll up on them to harass them. It really opens up lines of respectful communication."

The dialogues are often the first time young people have respectful conversations with police officers.

"Afterwards, instead of ice grilling — a cold, tough, dirty look — cops might get anything from a friendly hello to a grudging wave, but they've talked about stuff. And we've heard this again and again from different cops in different neighborhoods," added Stone.

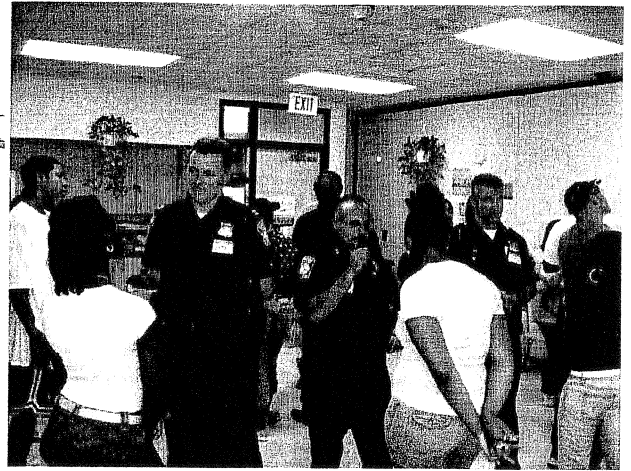
Youth Services Officer Elvis Garcia, who has a good relationship with a lot of teenagers in Roslindale, also attested to the positive effect the dialogues had.

"It was good to see other officers interacting with the youth, because if you just go by observation, you're not really getting a true feel of who these kids really are," said Garcia. "Officers get to see that these kids are not rough once you get to know them, and the youth say the same thing about the officers."

The life swap idea — sometimes also called 'trading places' or 'cop for a day' — frequently comes up in the course of Youth-Police Dialogues, said Stone. So far, only E-5 has acted on the concept. The idea of having cops going to school with kids is a unique twist.

Ellison took the dialogues a step further.

"In the meetings, one kid said that he'd snitch if his boy's



girl was cheating on him, but if someone was being murdered, that wouldn't warrant cooperating with the police. That being said, I thought we had to do something," said Ellison. "A lot of kids haven't seen what shootings do — not only to victims, but to the community and to families."

Ellison met Belgrave at a Rite Aid Pharmacy on Washington St., where Belgrave expressed his interest in learning about police work. The teenager's openness impressed Ellison, and he thought Belgrave could be a good spokesperson for the program. They agreed to the swap.

Ellison spent one harrowing day in high school, where students gave him the cold shoulder at first, suspecting him of infiltration.

"It was very tough, because I always look at myself as someone who's there to protect them, and I learned that a lot of them would not even approach me if someone caused them harm," said Ellison. "If some artist had come in there, everyone would have been happy to stand next to them; but when's the last time 50 Cent came to their school trying to make a difference? It was an experience."

"I have to give Fabian credit. He didn't try to distance himself from me and pretend it was a bad thing," added Ellison.

Belgrave spent a day in a police car, where he witnessed the grief that a 13-year-old boy's family suffered after he was killed by a stray bullet.

Belgrave also saw how none of the community was willing to help out Ellison.

"I heard the family's cries, and that was the saddest part. After you hear them wailing, you want to know who caused that," said Belgrave.

Since the exchange, Belgrave has become a part of the family at E-5, and with encouragement from Ellison, will apply to the Boston Police Cadet Program.

Young people from Archdale and surrounding areas have even stepped up and offered to swap since the pilot.

"This was a positive experience that reinvigorated my commitment to making a difference," said Ellison. "If we can intervene before kids get in trouble, especially if people like Fabian are out there saying we're not bad guys and going the extra mile, this can be a success."