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Explorers program run by Goodyear police helps teens hone skills

by **Jackee Coe** - Sept. 21, 2011 09:11 AM
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Goodyear's police Explorers program is helping Jasmine Esquivel get the experience and skills she needs to become a police officer.

The 19-year-old Buckeye resident decided as a child that she wanted to become a police officer after seeing the gang lifestyle her father lived.

"I've always been drawn to want to do something with my life, and it's always been [law enforcement](#)," she said. "I want to get people like him off the streets."

Esquivel, who also volunteers with the Buckeye Police Department and is studying criminal justice at Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale, has been in the Goodyear Police Department's Explorers program for about four years. She said it has strengthened her desire to become an officer and has taught her the leadership skills she will need to work her way through the ranks.

[Goodyear police Explorer program](#)

The police Explorers program teaches teens interested in a law enforcement career the ins and outs of police work to prepare them for the field. It also works as a mentorship program to teach them responsibility, professionalism, leadership and character.

The 10 teens in Goodyear's Explorers program, or post, range from 15 to 19. They meet twice a month to learn about specific areas of police work, such as K-9 and criminal investigations, and do training exercises, including building searches and trips to the shooting range. They learn the department's radio code and go on ride-alongs with police officers, often assisting officers with filling out forms and paperwork.

Additionally, Explorers help with special city events, like the annual Shop-With-A-Cop and Getting Arizona Involved in Neighborhoods events, doing things such as traffic control and distributing information.

Teens say they are getting valuable experience that will give them an advantage once they apply for a position at a police department and enter the academy.

"It prepares you," said Victor Vazquez, 17, of Goodyear, a senior at Agua Fria High School in Avondale, who has been in the program for eight months. "You begin your networking, and you also begin to get a glimpse of the types of training you might receive at the law enforcement academy, so it kind of puts you one step ahead of the game."

Officer Kyle Rogers, a school resource officer who oversees the program along with resource Officer Jason Costello, said those who participate in a police Explorers program, whether in Goodyear or another city, have a greater chance of being hired at a police department because of the experience they gain and relationships they develop with police officers. He said four Goodyear officers started off as Explorers; two of them were Goodyear Explorers for several years.

"It's going to give them more credibility . . . if they ended up applying for the department as an officer," Rogers said. "They still have to meet all the requirements, but you have somebody that's been dedicated to the city and to the Police Department . . . and that means something."

The teens said they have learned leadership, responsibility, professionalism and [communication](#) through the program - lessons that have carried over into their personal lives.

"It's helped me with life at home with my family," said 16-year-old Thomas Folkner, of Goodyear, a junior at Millennium High School in Goodyear who has been in the program for eight months. "If we were in an argument or anything, (I know) I need to get that communication with them and just talk with them and find out what's going on from their perspective and not just look at it through my own eyes."

Goodyear resident Max Messer, 16, a junior at Verrado High School in Buckeye who has been in the program for two years, agreed. He said he has learned to do his chores at home without having to be reminded by his parents and to get school assignments done right away.

When he applied for his job at Robeks Juice in Goodyear, Messer said, the managers liked that he was an Explorer because it showed he was responsible and could be trusted.

Rogers and Costello mentor the teens, offering guidance and encouragement in school and their personal lives.

Jorge Espinoza, 19, of Avondale, who is studying [communications](#) at Estrella Mountain Community College and has been in the program for two years, said he used to be "class clown" but has learned from the officers when to be serious and when to joke around.

"They're real cool, real flexible with us," he said. "They understand school; they understand everything that's going on in our lives."

For the teens, the post is more than just a way for them to gain experience and the skills to pursue their aspirations. They're like a family, something that was apparent at their meeting Aug. 31 as they shifted back and forth between being serious and joking together while they trained on how to do building searches.

"We all joke around," said Dion Abril, 18, a Goodyear resident who is studying criminal justice at Estrella Mountain Community College and has been in the program for three years. "We got some new Explorers this year and . . . we all just started growing closer together and we all became friends."

Esquivel, the four-year Explorer and Buckeye resident, agreed.

"It feels like family. It's very oriented like that. We all know what's going on with each other," she said.

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