

SOUTH JERSEY NEWS

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In N.J., junior sleuths get a taste of police work

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Bullet casings lined the ground next to a black Charger as Juan Rivera grabbed a video camera to document the scene of the "shooting" and the "evidence" his forensics team had just scoured.

"Guys!" he yelled, before whistling and waving with authority, instructing the investigating team to clear the scene.

The crew obliged. Rivera moved about the scene in Gloucester Township, focusing on areas of interest: the shells, a handprint on the window, a gun. It was his first time recording a "crime scene." He's 14.

Rivera was one of 49 recruits to take part in the first Gloucester Township Junior Police Academy. This week, 14 teens, ranging from 13 to 15 years old, trained alongside Rivera. Last week, the Police Department graduated 34 children ages 10 through 12.

Similar to the township's annual Citizens Police Academy, this one-week, hands-on camp covers multiple aspects of policing - but with more pizzazz.

On Tuesday, the teens learned about crime-scene investigations. In addition to searching mock scenes, they practiced documenting evidence, using alternative light sources to spot blood, and tracing fingerprints using magnetic powder.

Other activities for the week included meeting the canine unit, visiting a juvenile detention center, and practicing motor-vehicle stops.

Detective Patrick Cunane of the department's Crime Scenes and Property Unit led the lessons, along with Agent Brian Bates.



AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer
Detective Pat Cunane (right) shows recruits how evidence is collected. He said he can do more fun activities with the junior academy than in the department's regular citizens academy.

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"Everything in here we have to make sure is kid safe," Cunane said.

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The presentation took a more mature tone for the older recruits in week two, Cunane said. He was able to talk more seriously about blood and fluids sometimes associated with crime scene investigations.

Still, Cunane said he was able to do more fun activities with the academy than in the department's regular citizens academy. That free eight-week course gives an overview of police life to residents at least 16 years old.

"It's toys, that's all it is [to the youth]. It's bringing out these toys, those toys, our laser," Cunane said.

Kids oohed and aahed at the trajectory laser demonstrated toward the end of camp on Tuesday. It's used to determine the direction from which bullets were fired.

"Dude, that is so cool," one girl said to her peers.

But apart from the fun, officers said, the program is educational.

Jen McLaughlin, a DARE officer and member of the department's Community Relations Bureau, said the camp enforced the idea of teamwork.

Many in the first session, held last week, said they most enjoyed the department's Special Response Team presentation, which included fitting into the gear and searching a building.

At the camp, some recruits seemed certain policing would be in their future.

Alyssa Fario, 13, said she would like to be an officer in the township. Sarah French, 13, of Blackwood, said she wanted to profile criminals.

"I like the idea of learning a lot about criminals and using that knowledge to [solve] cases," she said.

Others liked what they saw as job benefits.

Kaitlyn Freeman, 10, from Gloucester's Erial section, said it would be fun "to drive around in those cars all week."

McLaughlin recalled her time in the real Camden County Police Academy.

"They had you rolling in the mud," she said.

Though the junior academy isn't quite as long or physically intense, she said, it still exposes youth to police life.

Each day began with physical training.

"I'm not going to be able to whip them in shape in one week," said Officer David Belcher, in charge of training and nutrition at the academy. "My goal is to make sure these kids know how to exercise appropriately . . . and hopefully, continue to exercise after they're gone."

For some parents, like those of 10-year-old Nick Vernon of Gloucester Township, the program was a chance to switch up the summer monotony.

"I wanted to get him out," said his mother, Andrea Vernon.

His father, Jason, added: "The day they did the crime scene investigation . . . we couldn't get him to stop talking about it.

"He was really fascinated with it. It was great to see him really get into something."

Officers had been thinking about holding a junior academy for a few years, Lt. Brendan Barton said, but lacked manpower in the Community Relations Bureau. This year, McLaughlin and Belcher were assigned to the bureau for the summer, which allowed the program to begin.

For many of the teens, the behind-the-scenes policing was a draw.

"It's very interesting to see everything from a different perspective," said Rivera, an eighth grader from Glendora.

Rivera said he wants to join the military but would consider law enforcement afterward.

"It's pretty nice, I'll have to admit," he said of the program. "Everyone was a bit groggy the first day, but it really stepped up. I can't believe the day is almost over."

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