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Anthony Westbury: New Boy Scout troop is transforming lives already

By Anthony Westbury

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The police chief admitted he'd once been arrested. The state representative fessed up that he'd been suspended from school for shooting dice in the bathroom.

Their point was that everyone makes mistakes; the trick is to learn from our missteps and try never to repeat them.

That was one message a high-powered group of community leaders brought to a group of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders at Dan McCarty Middle School in Fort Pierce last week.

The 51 boys were chosen because they'd each had at least two referrals to the dean this school year for being disrespectful, defiant or not sticking to school rules.

Philanthropist Scott Van Duzer chose Dan McCarty for the location of a new Boy Scout troop because its students have some of the highest poverty rates in Fort Pierce and the school is one of two F-rated schools in the St. Lucie County School District.

The 12- and 13-year-olds are in exactly the place where gangs typically recruit new members.

Immediately after hearing from Fort Pierce Police Chief Sean Baldwin, State Rep. Larry Lee, Fire Chief Ron Parrish, School Board member Troy Ingersoll and others, Van Duzer asked who'd like to sign up for Troop 772.

"I expected maybe a handful," Van Duzer said, "but 51 hands shot up."

Even better, once the news got around school the next day, another 27 boys expressed interest in joining, too. More boys have approached him since, Principal David Washington told me Thursday.

The troop, led by scoutmaster Rusty Hines, held its first meeting Wednesday after school, and the 25 or so boys who showed up had their own message for the adults.

"We asked them to write a paragraph about why they wanted to become Scouts and

what expectations they had,” Hines explained. “To me, what they said was really powerful.”

One boy wrote that he expected the Scouts to teach him how to become a man. Another, said he was looking “to do things I never done before, to be a better young man, to respect, to learn from older people that has experience.”

The final line really hit home:

“I’m interested in all things, I never been a boy scout before but would love to be one and learn new things and have a great time while I can. This way I know the streets can’t have Willie Collins Jr.”

The boys seemed to be telling Hines they craved more structure in their lives. They want to be good kids, not labeled as bad ones.

In particular, they said they wanted male role models in their lives, Hines said.

That’s something Hines can relate to, never having known his own father. His single mom insisted he and his brother joined the Scouts. It was there he first learned about strong men.

Hines noted the boys have a lot of respect for the strong males that are in their lives — Principal Washington and Dean Wonderful Monds in particular. The boys respect those men precisely because they are tough with them, Hines said.

“Respect is a big thing we’ll be covering,” Hines said. “Looking people in the eye, holding your head up high.

“I really believe these boys want to be good people,” Hines continued. “Scott asked them why they’d gotten in trouble and why they weren’t ‘good’ people. They told us it’s because that way they can get attention. Even bad attention is better than nothing.”

It’s only been a little more than a week since Troop 772 was formed but already it’s making positive waves both on campus and in the wider community.

This Sunday, 11 of the boys will get their first reward: tickets to see the Miami Dolphins play the New England Patriots, courtesy of Mike Wetzel of Sunrise Ford.

A little structure obviously goes a long way, and we’ve only just begun.

Anthony Westbury is a columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. This column reflects his opinion. Contact him at 772-221-4220, anthony.westbury@scripps.com, or TCPalmWestbury on Twitter.

HOW TO HELP TROOP 772

The Van Duzer Foundation has received about \$5,000 in donations, but as Troop 772's popularity increases so will its financial needs. The troop needs uniforms, funds for registration fees and for camping and other trips.

Port St. Lucie dermatologist Dr. Shamsheer Singh has agreed to match all donations up to the amount of \$10,000.

You can donate by calling 772-528-3467 or go to www.thevanduzerfoundation.org.

Troop 772 also needs more committed adult volunteers who want to turn the tide on the violence and destruction that is claiming the lives of the children of northwest Fort Pierce.



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