

# Cops, teens bond during basketball tournament



MELISSA MONTOYA, MMONTOYA@NEWS-PRESS.COM 9:46 p.m. EDT October 3, 2015



(Photo: Melissa Montoya/news-press.com)

For months, Fort Myers teens have met with deputies at the sheriff's office and discussed issues with law enforcement.

One teen said he hated cops. Another said he believed police didn't like dealing with black people.

Deputies, in turn, shared what it's like to go on a house call with no idea what to expect. Since then, they've begun to relate to each other.

On Saturday, the conversation turned to play when law enforcement battled youth for basketball court domination at the Stars Complex.

"A lot of the citizens don't feel safe because they don't feel like they've got a good relationship with officers in the community," said Tonio Bridley, a mentor with Pick up the Ball, an organization working to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the community. Pick up the Ball helped organize Saturday's tournament.

Bridley, 24, said the effort deputies and police showed by showing up to play will go a long way in changing the community's mind.

"We need to see there's a connection there," Bridley said. "[Bonding](#) is the key."

When people bond, they begin to trust and confide in one another, Bridley said, which can lead to more community cooperation when it comes to getting crimes solved.

"I won't go up to someone I don't know and tell them what happened," he said.

Fort Myers interim police Chief Dennis Eads and Lee County Sheriff Mike Scott said community outreach is part of a two-pronged approach in dealing with violence in Fort Myers. The second part is teaming up and going after violent offenders who have plagued the city.

Fort Myers patrol officer Matt Vagi agrees. He said bonding with the community helps him do a better job at policing while also humanizing him. Many people don't think of police as regular people, he said. But the games show he likes to have fun, too.

"It makes it easier, just knowing people," Vagi said of policing. "When you don't know people, you've got nothing."

Bridley, of Pick up the Ball, said keeping kids from boredom will keep them from committing mistakes.

That's why C.J. Thelusma decided to join Pick up the Ball after watching a game on Saturday.

The [South Fort Myers High School](#) student enjoys playing basketball. He believes the group will help him "make it out of Fort Myers, do big things and go to college."

He wants to be a basketball player, but he'll settle for a career in law enforcement, if he doesn't make it to the NBA, the 16-year-old said.

Elainer Richardson, 20, said the event should be held more than once because the community needs it.

"A lot of people don't like the police, so it's good for them to do this," the Fort Myers resident said. "I can see they are trying to get more people involved instead of always trying to shut stuff down."

news-press.com GET YOUR FIRST 6 MONTHS ON A SUBSCRIPTION OF

# 50% OFF

CLICK BELOW TO UNLOCK YOUR OFFER

**UNLOCK MY 50% OFF OFFER**

As 4-year-old Devante White Jr. cheered on the players, his father Devante White Sr., 22, said he was there to support his friends from his neighborhood and the cops who were playing.

"There might be a guy in there that got arrested by one of the cops that playing," White said. "If you bring them together, it changes things."

Cops and kids enjoying each other's company is important to curb crime in Fort Myers, [Earnest Brown](#) said.

But, the 26-year-old said he also can't help but think the tournament is a joyous occasion the community needs after living through so much violence recently.

It's not unusual for many in the community to know someone who has died in a violent way, Brown said.

"I think about them all the time," he said, "but events like this puts you in a good place."



Cops and Fort Myers residents came together for a basketball game at the Stars Complex Saturday. (Photo: [Melissa Montoya/news-press.com](#))

Read or Share this story: <http://newspr.es/1LaS0EX>



<p>Hp Color Laserjet M451nw Printer</p> <p><b>\$399.99</b></p>
<p>Hp M252dw B4a22a#bj Color L...</p> <p><b>\$199.99</b></p>

**TOP VIDEOS**

