

Lansing State Journal  
May 22, 2022

<https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/opinion/contributors/viewpoints/2022/05/20/these-police-officers-community-engagement-year-round-effort/9703255002/>

## Community members and police officers are all individuals

It's no secret there's a gap between communities and police departments across the country. In order to close this gap and create better relationships, police officers and community members must have ongoing, meaningful dialogue to better understand one another.

An example of this here locally is the Michigan's "Exchange for Change" program, held at Peckham Inc. in Lansing. During this program, officers from the Lansing Police Department interact with youth from the community we serve, and it is a humbling experience.

Officers that attend are able to sit down with youth and share our experiences and perspectives on situations we encounter every day. Youth are able to explain their outlooks, ask questions and interact with us on a deeper level.

Overall, this is a great experience. It was an important reminder to never assume and not judge a book by its cover — to be more aware of our implicit biases, and effectively communicate with one another to help good things transpire.

I was able to open up to youth about my life, my struggles and successes. Sharing my experiences with them, and what I've endured growing up in Lansing, created a strong, visible impact on them. They could relate to me, understand my outlook and how that's shaped me as an officer.

The youth, in turn, felt comfortable opening up to officers too; it was an emotional experience to see them grow and adapt in such a short amount of time with everyone involved in the program.

I believe every officer should go through a program such as Exchange for Change. It was a great experience and I would do it again.

*Tori Brooks has been a police officer for eight years, five of them with the Lansing Police Department. She participated in the first "Exchange for Change" program sponsored by Peckham Youth Services, the Lansing Police Department and Michigan's Children.*



## **We are all responsible for bridging the gap between youth and police**

Growing up in Lansing, my view of police officers was actually not good at all. I've been to jail, did 28 months in prison and spent time at Ingham Academy. I always thought cops were out to get me, and I had encounters where they dragged me across the floor, slamming me around. As I got older, I've realized it's not always the cops who are causing the problems.

The time I spent recently in "Exchange for Change" — with a group of Lansing police officers and local youth — was a big release for me. In my 23 years in Lansing, I had not encountered a program like this. By being part of something like this, I felt the officers trying to understand the youth. For them to take the time out of their day and invest in us, it helps a lot. Even though there's a lot of stuff going on with cops killing people, I just want people to know there are good cops out there.

Over three months, we met and brainstormed ways to promote positive police and youth interactions — to prevent brutality and trauma, while building on individual rights and trust. For me, I want to continue to be mature and respectful, so that I can help people around me and help bring peace to Lansing. I want to reach out to other youth, speaking with knowledge and wisdom.

From police, I want them to understand that we are all human. I know they have a big role to play in life, and that being a cop is like being a target. I know now they are dealing with a lot of stress, anxiety and fear. But what I want is for all of them to act carefully with the power they have and not abuse it. We've got to step back and look at the people that are hurting out there.

People these days are going through a lot of trauma, mentally. We have to come together with love and peace in mind. And if someone is acting up, and the cops know their past, they have to handle the situation without using gun violence.

*Eric Humes participated in the first "Exchange for Change" program sponsored by Peckham Youth Services, the Lansing Police Department and Michigan's Children.*



## **Being vulnerable, shared perspectives help us through the trauma**

As police officers, it is important for us to maintain a healthy relationship with the community we serve. It is crucial for the community to have trust and comfort with their police department. Trust and comfort can be established by having productive dialogue between the department and the community.

An example of this is the Michigan's Children and Peckham Youth Services' "Exchange for Change" program, where Lansing police officers are presented with a unique opportunity to have a healthy dialogue with youth from our community. This program was extremely beneficial for youth and officers.

I personally thought it was an excellent opportunity to be vulnerable with youth and share our perspective with them. Officers were also able to gain a perspective from the youths' view of police officers. The program was an important reminder that not only police officers go through a lot of trauma



but many youths that we come across during our jobs are either experiencing or have experienced a traumatic event.

Some things that I learned during this program are the importance of effective communication and having patience while dealing with our youth. Youth were also given tips on certain procedural things that the police officers must do while responding to incidents.

Often times, officers have to react to the information that is provided to them through dispatch. We came to an agreement that the information provided to dispatch by 911 callers is not always accurate. Therefore, it is important to slow things down and communicate through the situation at hand.

At the end of the third session, officers and youth had built a unique and special bond. I got to experience this bond first-hand. Several weeks after the session, I was on patrol in my assigned area when one of the youth from the program approached my police vehicle and had a casual conversation with me. This was really humbling for me because I had dealt with this youth before the program started, and he would not have come up to me to have a conversation. It is safe to say that this youth had begun to trust us and the Exchange for Change program had assured this youth that not all police officers are bad, and that we genuinely want the best for our community.

*Sagar "Sam" Kandel is a community policing officer and three-year veteran of the Lansing Police Department. He participated in the first "Exchange for Change" program sponsored by Peckham Youth Services, the Lansing Police Department and Michigan's Children.*

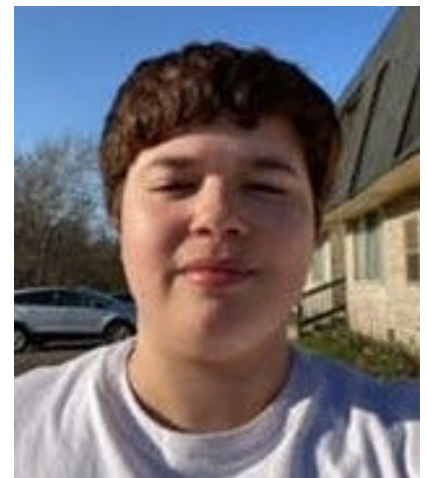
## **Having uncomfortable conversations with police officers is a start**

I first got involved with the court system due to truancy. I ended up getting sent to Ingham Academy, where my life did a 360. My life started over again there. I had a support system like nothing I had before. I ended up going from failing grades to honor roll, and from being told I wouldn't make it to being told I was set up to be successful.

Other than truancy, I never really got in trouble with the law. I stayed to myself most of the time, especially when I was on probation. So, my interactions with police officers were always great interactions. But, when you see social media and what's going on in the world with police brutality and racism, it makes you scared no matter your race.

When I was offered the opportunity to be a part of the "Exchange for Change" program, I didn't think I was a good fit at first due to the fact I am a white Hispanic, but I took the opportunity to sit down with four Lansing police officers and have an uncomfortable conversation that most choose not to have.

I was accompanied by four other students who individually had their own interactions with police officers, some far worse than my own. Initially going in, I thought the officers would be stuck up, closed-minded and would try to lead the conversations — they were the total opposite. I felt like they took the conversation very seriously, listened to our opinions and tried their best to answer all the uncomfortable questions we threw at them.



We talked about how the Lansing Police Department is understaffed. We brought up the Black Lives Matter movement; Blue Lives Matter and what that represented to them; future LGBTQ interactions, especially with transgender and non-binary individuals; and we also got to hear the other side of the script of how officers feel going into calls with little to no information other than the initial call itself.

By the end of the conversation, I felt like it was a good start to something that could eventually help the community. I definitely think more officers and more youth need to sit down and have these discussions with no boundaries other than respect for one another.

*Helana Lang lives in Lansing, and participated in the first "Exchange for Change" program sponsored by Peckham Youth Services, the Lansing Police Department and Michigan's Children.*