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Officer Dimitri Ellison, Flowood PD

To Protect, Serve, and Teach our Children

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Proverbs 22:6

Story By **JUDY SMITH**
Photos by **GREG PEVEY**

It is with that strong belief in imparting knowledge and guidance in today's children that has guided the devoted police officers of the D.A.R.E. program in Rankin County. Helping these young people realize how special they are while assisting them through some of life's greatest challenges brings great joy to these very special officers.

Dimitri Ellison, the school resource of-

ficer for Northwest Rankin Middle School, and Sam Versell, Brandon police officer, abide by these values to guide them as they teach the young people in the Rankin County area of the dangers of drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. But the D.A.R.E. program is so much more. It allows the officers an opportunity to open the lines of communication with these children, helping them work through the problems that they may face in their lives. They work on all problems--peer pressure, bullying, and

so much more. Ellison and Versell get a unique chance to teach life lessons in a non judgmental forum that allows children to have a voice, allowing them to ask questions about topics that they might not feel comfortable approaching in another environment.

The D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program launched in 1983 to teach the dangers of substance abuse while also imparting life skills to children, encouraging them to stand up for what they believe in and to be confident individuals capable of making excellent decisions. This program has proven successful in Rankin County, and the officers love their work, enjoying every minute they get to spend with the kids.

Ellison has been with D.A.R.E. program for five years, and feels that every day spent among the future of tomorrow is a gift sent from God. “It is definitely a blessing to work with the kids,” Ellison said. “I enjoy it so much. I truly feel blessed each time I get to step in the classroom. I take every day as a gift and try to live each day to the fullest.”

Ellison and his wife, Angela, a teacher at Northwest Rankin Middle School, praise even the smallest of joys despite the hardship that the family has endured throughout the years. The couple's son, ReShawd, has faced his fair share of pain and suffering in his young life. Early in his life, ReShawd suffered two strokes, and then a brain hemorrhage on his tenth birthday. The strokes ReShawd has suffered have left him in a wheelchair, but that has not wiped the eternal smile off this brave Northwest Rankin senior's face. The Ellison family greets each day with thankful hearts.

“Each day that we see ReShawd breathing on his own without tubes running out of his body is a blessing for us,” Ellison said. “It doesn't always have to be a big explosion. Sometimes it's the little flame that should get attention. That's how most things start. Why can't we find peace and joy in all those things? I try to bring out that idea to the kids.”

It is that joyful heart and optimistic attitude that Ellison brings to his job. Ellison's jovial voice and booming laugh can be heard as he teaches life lessons to his eager pupils, and he always puts them at ease, allowing them to feel comfortable enough to ask questions about difficult topics. You can't help but smile when you

hear the enthusiasm in Ellison's voice as he waxes eloquent about his love for his work.

It's hard to miss Ellison in his big black D.A.R.E. truck with the flames on the side. The kids in the area know that when they see that truck they've got a friend that they can trust, and the children are very receptive to him and his messages.

"We have a blast!" Ellison said with a laugh. "It's always a fun time with the kids, and we try to create an environment where the kids feel comfortable enough to communicate freely."

Through their two week training sessions to become certified in the D.A.R.E. program, the officers learn how to create that open environment with the kids as

could be. When the children may not have a good home life or trusted friend, the D.A.R.E. officers always step up to be that confidante for each child. The officers play games with the kids concerning the importance of making good decisions about bullying, friendships, and good and bad peer pressure. Versell has developed a creative approach to creating this type of environment to help create a dialogue with the kids on what is important in their lives.

"We try to paint a picture or a situation and let the kids take it from there," Versell said. "I don't try to tell the kids what to do. We talk through situations. We pose questions and collaborate with them. That way, they can make better decisions when

Versell and Ellison feel that they learn just as much as the kids do. It is that open learning environment that allows for the constant flow of information from the officers to the kids and vice versa. The kids don't feel that they are being preached to. The officers have developed a very effective manner of connecting with the children.

"You take what the kids give you, and you work with that," Ellison said. "It's always a unique situation, but we try to emphasize that no matter how bad something may seem, they can work to find a resolution."

Versell makes the kids really question why they make the decisions, urging them to educate themselves before they make a decision. Versell emphasizes that this is the only way that good choices can be made. Through his thought-provoking questions, Versell makes the kids ponder things that they never had thought about before. He wants the kids to question why they follow trends or imitate someone else. When the kids follow the trend of the day by letting their pants sag below their waist, he asks them where that idea came from. Some might know that it came from the prison culture but don't know the specifics. When Versell informs them that it signifies a hierarchy system in the prison, he really opens the eyes of the kids.

"When they find out that the sagging pants signified the females in prison while the men in authority wore their pants at the waist, I noticed a lot of them pulling up their pants," Versell said. "They really learn how valuable it is to question things and to educate yourself before you follow a trend. We approach the topics with some humor, but the kids understand how important it is to follow your own mind."

Versell's laid back but caring approach to such topics makes a conducive environment where the kids are not afraid to discuss sensitive topics with him. "We are all about fun while we are learning, and I think the kids really respond to that," Versell said. "In that kind of environment, you can get the kids to really think about things that they might not have ever thought about."

Barton worked with Versell during her first year of teaching the D.A.R.E. program at Brandon Middle School. She always loved how he approached each lesson and how responsive the kids were to him. "He is awesome!" Barton said. "He's

Officer Kristian Barton, Rankin County Sheriff's Office



well as how to approach these sensitive topics. Versell is not ashamed to admit that this training was "the toughest" that he ever had to go through, but he felt that he put more pressure on himself because he felt such an obligation to be a good leader and role model for the children.

"When you have these young kids looking up at you with all these questions, you want to do everything you can to help them make the right decisions," Versell said. "That can be a little intimidating."

Kristen Barton was a D.A.R.E. officer for four years in several Rankin County elementary schools, and she understood how daunting this very important task

they learn that all decisions have consequences whether they be good or bad."

Ellison likes the fact that the D.A.R.E. program generates lots of questions. Through those open lines of communication, sensitive issues can be broached, and the officers and kids can work together to find a solution.

"I want the kids to know that they can always talk freely with me," Ellison said. "We want them to think about issues, talk about them, and really work through the problems so that they can make good decisions. That's pretty cool when you see the kids light up as they realize that they can make difference."

a prankster, and the kids absolutely love him!”

The D.A.R.E. program has proven to be very effective for the community and the area youth. Versell attributes the arrest of individuals involved with a meth lab in Rankin County to the program. One of Versell’s students had seen suspicious activity in the woods near her home and suspected that the individuals were making drugs. She told her parents who contacted the authorities, leading to an arrest and the destruction of the drug facilities. Versell feels that the D.A.R.E. program encouraged the student to make a brave decision and report the activity. It is in such times in which the D.A.R.E. officers draw the greatest joy.

“It really is a pleasure when the kids feel like that they can really open up to me and ask me anything,” Ellison said. “It makes me proud when the kids come to me and say that they know what they want to be—that we’ve helped them to map out their lives. It’s that type of spark that really keeps me going.”

The love and concern that the officers have for the children is readily apparent. They are devoted to their work, and their work is making great progress in the lives of the children and the community at large. “I want the kids to know that they are part of something bigger than themselves,” Ellison said. “I want them to develop strength within themselves and to believe in themselves.”

One basic lesson that the officers always emphasize is that each child should be know that they are loved and are important. If that goal is accomplished, then the officers feel that they have accomplished one of their major goals. “I want those kids to realize that no matter where they’ve come from, they can be ‘somebody’ and make a difference,” Barton said. “I want them to realize that they are special no matter what their home life is like or no matter what their parents have done or haven’t done. If I can show them how special they are and to believe in themselves, then I feel like I’ve accomplished something great.”

When the officers create a caring environment filled with warm conversation where no one passes judgment on anyone else, great things can happen. The D.A.R.E. program is extremely effective, and the officers have a wonderful opportunity to touch lives. “The bond that I’ve

formed with so many kids since teaching D.A.R.E. is amazing,” Barton said. She is always in awe of how the children’s reaction of awe and timidity from the first lesson progresses into a warm, heartfelt relationship. “By the last lesson—usually way before the last lesson—they are running up to me, hugging me when I walk in, hugging me when I leave, and wanting to tell me all about things that are going on in their life or at school. So, you develop a lasting relationship.”

It is humbling to the officers when they realize that they have made positive changes in the lives of these children.

backgrounds, hopes, and dreams. He takes time to nurture an open, caring relationship which allows his students to understand just how special they are, and they love him for the concern that he always shows each student.

But that love does not come without some work on Ellison’s part. He is completely devoted to his work and his students, and he strives hard to improve each and every day. “I look at my day and try to see where I can improve,” Ellison said. “If I don’t challenge myself, then who will? Every day, I pray to God that I’m better than I was the day before. I know that



Officer Sam Versell, Brandon PD



“That really means a lot to me to be able to help the kids,” Versell said. “These kids just want someone to trust in them and believe in them. That is what we try to offer—mutual respect.”

Ellison has developed a great relationship with his students as well, and Barton always loved to see her comrade in action. “I have seen him with his students, and he is awesome!” Barton said. “His kids really love him.” Ellison takes the time to get to know each of his students—their lives,

any positives that may happen involving me are not to my credit. God is using me to touch these young lives, and I will work every day of my life to improve as a person and to continue to help others.”

It is that respect, love, and care that these officers bring to the classroom, helping the children develop into responsible well-educated adults. With the love and devotion that these officers bring to their job, you can’t help but feel pretty good about the future generation. You know that with the loving guidance and support that these incredible role models offer to today’s youth that the future can’t be anything but bright. All the officers of the D.A.R.E. program are daring angels that deserve praise for their noble and devoted work. - RL