

Pizza with the Police comes to the Alton Boys and Girls Club

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - In an effort to reach the children of the Alton area with a positive message about police officers, the Alton Police Department brought a large amount of pizzas to the Alton Boys and Girls Club Thursday afternoon.

Pizza was served during the organization's after-school "power hour," which allows children from the Alton Boys and Girls Club to do free reading and homework following classes. Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons said the Pizza with the Police function has served both the department and the community when it was previously utilized at Senior Services Plus. Simmons said many members of focus groups assisting the department with community policing also insisted the police try to extend their reach to young people as part of an effort to give them positive examples of police officers.

"Police always will do anything to make their jobs easier," Simmons said. "Kids are a wealth of information. They have helped us out by telling us where people are and what places are drug houses. A lot of these kids may have seen the negative side of policing by seeing people getting arrested and stuff like that. We want to show them a positive side of the police by bringing them pizza."

Little Caesars pizza and bottled water were provided by the Alton Police Department. Many officers also sat and ate with the kids, and answered questions they had involving what police do. A police bicycle and cruiser were also on hand for the kids to inspect. They were able to use the sirens and external microphones as well.

Alton Boys and Girls Club Executive Director Al Womack agreed with Simmons that the event demonstrates a sort of positive message kids in the organization may not otherwise receive. Many of the children walking single-file into the club asked why the police were there in worried tones.

"I'm excited about the police department's interest in connecting with these kids," Womack said. "It is a chance to build positive relationships with them. Kids are receptive - especially when pizza is involved."

Womack admitted the kids under his care have "mixed emotions regarding the police department. He said many of them have seen the negative side of police work and are also heavily influenced by social media's tendency to villainize police officers.

"I think it's important that the officers are coming here, so maybe we could change some of the kids' mindsets," Womack said.

Ultimately, Womack hopes the police department will one day work towards having a sit-down meeting with some of the older kids in the Alton Boys and Girls Club.

Womack believes such meetings could help students better understand the work the police department does, and would also help police understand the cares and concerns of high school students.

"Let's start here, and see what happens," Womack said of the event.