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HYDE PARK, ROXBURY

Officer duo to be honored for work strengthening teen-police bond

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

William Baxter and Darryl Owens graduated from Boston's police academy together 22 years ago, and the two Boston officers have resumed working together to revive a version of police academy for at-risk city youths.

After the program went through a several-year hiatus, the duo re-launched the teen police academy last summer, and they will be commended for that effort this week.

The two men will receive the "Child and Family Advocacy Award" from Children's Services of Roxbury at the organization's Strengthening Families Awards Dinner at UMass-Boston Wednesday night.

"These men are the heart and soul of the program," said Johnny Hudson, operations director at CSROx. "They have touched the lives of over 600 at-risk teens, and only for the better."

Baxter, who has worked closely with youth through the CSROx Youth and Police in Partnership program since its inception in 1995, has witnessed how such initiatives can strengthen crucial bonds between law enforcement and urban teens – two groups that don't always see eye-to-eye.

"I've become a godfather, an uncle, a big brother," said Baxter, community relations officer for District B-2 in Roxbury. "I even gave one graduate of the program away at her marriage," several years later.

He recalled that when he first spoke to that young woman, he met with the teen about her frequent absences from school. He persuaded her to make sure she attended class on time.

Years later the program alumna had become a member of the staff, and there were ironic instances in which she was the one telling truant teens to stay in school.

"It's very rich and rewarding for me to see that," Baxter said. "I'm blown away by what these kids are accomplishing."

Owens remembered how when the revived teen academy's first class of around 20 members graduated last summer, many of the students left shedding tears and exchanging cell phone numbers with officers at the city's police academy

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in Hyde Park.

“They came in and the wall was up, but by the time they left they were very receptive,” said Owens, who is the defensive tactics section head of the regular Boston Police Academy. “They left feeling they were employees of the Boston Police Department.”

As men of color who each grew up in tough Boston neighborhoods, both officers said they can often closely relate to teens who participate in the program, which Owens called “a behind-the-scenes, customized look at policing.”

Baxter grew up in Orchard Gardens, then called Orchard Park, an area surrounded by violence, gangs, drugs and criminal activity. He said he found an outlet through playing sports.

Owens, 45, grew up in Mattapan. He and his two siblings were raised by a single mother. Before Owens turned 10, his father died in Walpole State Prison.

“I had to run from violence. I had to make sure I wasn’t walking through certain neighborhoods at certain times of day,” he said.

When the officer drives teen police academy students home, he is sometimes asked to drop them off several blocks from where they live, because of the danger they could face if neighbors saw the teen emerging from a police cruiser.

As a youth, Owens said he found an outlet, and a father figure, at a karate studio in Roxbury he took lessons at from age 12 to 26. He left a black belt.

Similar to how he felt when he started training in karate, Owens said many teens are “looking for definition. They’re looking for a place to belong. What I think they really walk away from here with is a feeling of identity.”

Aside from Baxter and Owens, the program is taught by the entire Boston Police Academy staff of around 15.

Curtis Santos, a 24-year-old alum of the YPP program who is now a lead coordinator, said Baxter helped him when he was struggling in school several years ago.

“He’s like a mentor to me. I could always count on him,” said Santos.

He met Owens last year and described the officer as “a tough cookie,” but who also has a soft side.

Current program members and peer leaders, LeRoy McPherson, 16, and David Hawkesworth Hale, 15, said they’ve each benefitted from their experiences with both officers.

“It wasn’t what I expected,” said Hawkesworth of the program, that also taught such classes on resume writing. “It gave me more skills than I thought it would.”

“A lot of people don’t know how police work. They have ideas and stereotypes about how it works,” said McPherson.

Going through the program helped him sort out the fact from the fiction about the daily life of an officer.

The key idea behind the teen police academy is to foster stronger personal ties

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