

Deputies Refuse to Write Off Youths to 2010 Prophecy

NORFOLK, VA.

Master Deputy Bob Walsh and Auxiliary Deputy Tony Scarangella of the Norfolk Sheriff's Office have a niche; they've figured out how to communicate messages of concern and hope to youngsters at the prekindergarten through sixth-grade levels. The two crime-prevention practitioners, who between them have 56 years of experience working with children, use fun, interactive presentations to relate to this young population. The deputies, however, share more than a love of children. Both are retired U.S. Navy chief petty officers, and each served as a chaplain's assistant while on active duty. But their greatest similarity is their drive to disprove the doom and gloom forecasters who have written off America's youths by 2010. The deputies are convinced that this is not a lost generation and that today's young people can be reached.

Both deputies share their anti-crime message with the assistance of special partners. Walsh, using his skills as a ventriloquist, talks to children through three wooden figures that come alive in the personae of Deputy Matthew, Inmate Joe and Jeremiah Student. Using the puppets, Walsh carries on a humorous two-way dialogue to teach young people how to build their self-esteem and why it's important to be kind to their peers among other important life lessons. Scarangella, who has the distinction of being the first McGruff voice, uses a puppet

version of this character to teach kids how they can "take a bite out of crime."

Together, these two dedicated officers have educated and entertained more than 40,000 schoolchildren since meeting at a neighborhood crime-prevention coalition



Above: Tony Scarangella (left) and his pal McGruff, join Deputy Bob Walsh and friend, Matthew, in their quest to communicate messages of hope to Virginia's young schoolchildren.

dinner in early 1994. Both believe that the key to keeping kids from ever getting involved in crime is convincing them, at their most impressionable ages, that there is a better way. "Children need to know that they have choices," says Walsh. "If you can reach them while they're young, [the need for] rehabilitation and repair work later on is much less likely."

In November 1996, a bipartisan joint legislative audit and review commission said that "seven out of 10 youthful offenders released from Virginia institutions three years ago already have been [re]arrested for new crimes." On Dec. 16, 1996, the *Virginian-Pilot* ran an article titled "Rearrest Rate High for Juveniles in Virginia." In it, psychologist Dorothea Ross stated, "if a child is a bully at age eight, the outcome for him is likely to be very poor."

Furthermore, Children's Health Council psychologist Jomary Hilliard said that there is more "potential for children to be meaner today." This, Hilliard says, is encouraged by the rough role models that kids watch on TV and in movies. Walsh and Scarangella, too, are concerned that these mediums don't "sell" qualities such as respect, honesty and kindness, or promote positive messages of handling conflict without violence, attending school regularly and living drug-free lives. The two deputies say that it is up to parents, grandparents, teachers, neighbors and law enforcement officers, among others, to find ways to positively influence young people and teach them a different and better way of thinking and seeing their world.

A 1996 survey of 1,669 Norfolk parents and educators indicated that 91 percent wanted their children and students to receive character education. That summer, both the Portsmouth and Norfolk school boards approved a plan to teach a character-enhancing curriculum to its students. In addition, the Norfolk Public School System, in cooperation with the Norfolk Sheriff's Office, produced a series of public service announcements (PSAs) that air on one of the city's local cable channels. Some of the most popular PSAs, Walsh says, encourage kids to be kind and attend school, while others teach bicycle safety, and the consequences of stealing and using drugs. Deputies Walsh and Scarangella support their friend McGruff. By working together, they say, we can take a big bite out of juvenile crime.

By Sheriff Robert J. McCabe



"Children need to know that they have choices," says Walsh. "If you can reach them while they're young, [the need for] rehabilitation and repair work later on is much less likely."

Resources

For more information, contact Master Deputy Bob Walsh, Crime Prevention Specialist, Norfolk Sheriff's Office, 811 E. City Hall Ave., Norfolk, VA 23510. Phone (757) 664-4714, ext. 3805. Fax (757) 664-4723.

For additional resources, consult the Information Access Guide.