



Beyond the Badge

Mini Mounties Program: Metro's Mounted Platoon Brings Joy to Inner-City Kids

by Andrea Burrola

The overall decline in the economic welfare of families, especially the lack of available jobs and affordable housing, continue to negatively affect the well-being of today's youth. These strained situations aren't expected to ease in the near future, and for this reason, efforts and special attention should be particularly high during these times. Research shows that the most effective programs in helping to reduce crime rates and promote a positive future among adolescents are the ones administered at the community level. Enter Metro's Mounted Platoon officers, who today are establishing the essential building blocks to a great relationship with communities, families and, most importantly, kids who are desperately in need of positive reinforcement.



Mini Mounties participants and third-graders Emely Silva and Alejandra Mendoza cheerfully present their decorated pumpkins for Halloween.

ior or attendance," says Porter. It is the officers' hope that in giving these kids an opportunity to see a world beyond their own, it will help them to realize they can create positive futures for themselves.

The Progression of the Platoon

Since their inception six years ago, Mini Mounties has continued to gain much momentum. In 2004, while readying for their first excursion, officers reached out to Ninth Street Elementary School. The then-principal was ecstatic to get the program underway. With no budget, but a wealth of ideas, officers donated blood to a hospital offering free amusement park tickets for their donation. "The transformation we saw in these kids and the light in their eyes was incredible," says Porter. "It was an unbelievable success and these officers knew they had to tell their story to get more donations and funding to keep this program rolling."

Next on the agenda was the start of a three-day training academy with the platoon, where students would learn horse anatomy, barn and horse care and how to ride a horse. "Some of these kids had never even seen a horse before, and now they are learning how to ride and take care of one," says Vincent, adding that "a lot of things needed to be considered regarding the training academy."

"We needed to be able to feed these kids for three days, which we do with a BBQ, submarine sandwiches and pizza," according to Vincent. "An easy and inexpensive way to feed our maximum of 10 kids," he notes. Officers also needed to figure out a way to provide saddles, boots and helmets so the kids could ride. "With no budget, we had to pull our resources together," says Vincent, recalling some officers with kids who donated old pairs of shoes. "We pulled anything we could and then footed the rest of the bill to make the difference," he says. "We'd scour our couches for change to make it happen."

Combining Education and Fun

With some experience under their belts, Mini Mounties officers were ready to expand and work with more schools. Today, Leo Politi in Olympic Division and Para Los Ninos Charter School in Central have adopted Metro's Mounted Platoon's beneficial program, which offers the excursions and the training academy to students in second through sixth grades. There is also the goal to open the program to children in kindergarten through sixth grade.

Both schools have received tremendous generosity and compassion from the program, with kids visiting Staples Center's basketball games — including sitting in glass suites with all-you-can-eat refreshments — Knott's Berry Farm, Medieval Times, Aquarium of the Pacific, Dodger games and the Pantages Theatre, to name a few. "Are all these places educational? Maybe not," Vincent says jokingly. "But we put them in a new, spectacular



Leo Politi teacher Jenny Guzman and principal Brad Rumble enjoy a day at the Aquarium of the Pacific with students in third through fifth grades.

Painting a New Picture

During a time when states are looking for ways to save money and cut programs and resources, the Mini Mounties program has continued to grow stronger. Founded in 2004 by Metro's Mounted Platoon, with the help of Sergeant Mike Porter, who saw this as "an incredible opportunity to help kids in some of the worst areas of the City," the program was organized under the Nonprofit Public Benefit Corporation Law of charitable purposes within the meaning of Section 501 (c)(3).

"I had a 4-year-old who was completely stuck to me the whole day," said Porter, who recalls visiting one school. "At one point she thanked me for spending time with her and being so nice because the

only concept she's had of the police was when 'they came to pick up my daddy for putting bruises on me.' How does that not break your heart?"

The mission of the Mini Mounties program unfolds in three parts. First, officers know that these kids can, and often-times do, follow a path that's not in the best interest for their future. Be it peer pressure to join gangs or commit crimes (often taught to them by family members), it's sometimes their only choice. "Many of these kids join gangs because they are forced to go into survival mode. It's really the only way they know to survive the gritty streets of the Pico-Union area," notes Officer Russ Vincent of the Mounted Platoon.

Officers like Porter and Vincent saw a need for a more positive image of law enforcement in low-income, crime-ridden areas. Often, this has been accomplished by improving kids' character and building a positive relationship with law enforcement through teaching responsibility and respect at an early age. One way they've provided this to inner-city youth is with excursions and a three-day horse training academy, where students experience things they might never have otherwise. In order for a student to engage in fun, educational activities and/or the training academy, they need to show a desire to do better. "These excursions are not just for the excellent student; it's for the student who is improving in their studies, behav-



At the three-day training academy, students learn responsibility through horse and barn care.



Students from Leo Politi check out the variety of sealife at the Aquarium of the Pacific.

environment and just for the moment let them escape. Hopefully, they hang onto this memory forever; who knows, it may even change them.”

Such a positive change did occur for 10-year-old Katlyn, who moved with her parents from Maryland to California into a tiny, two-bedroom apartment, squeezed in with other family. Living in a not-so-good area, Katlyn, unfortunately, witnessed things that no young girl should, including domestic violence in her home. It instilled a fear within her that turned her into a very introverted and scared girl. She refrained from many school activities and avoided other kids.

Then one day, Mini Mounties was offering a trip to the Aquarium of the Pacific and invited Katlyn to attend. “She was very shy and scared at first,” says Vincent. But by the end of the day, Katlyn — once a girl constantly living in fear — was transformed into an excited, happy and carefree 10-year-old.

It wouldn’t be until the holidays that officers would realize the impact on the child. “Katlyn came to the station with her parents, took a picture with Santa, received a present from the officers and before leaving she gave one officer a wrapped gift. Understanding that it’s very under-privileged family, this is a big deal,” says Vincent. “The officer unwrapped the gift and discovered that the present was an individual-sized cereal box.” He continues, “The entire platoon was so excited and happy; it seemed for this little girl, the program had done its job.”

On a recent trip, officers took the student body government of Leo Politi to visit City Hall, meet with the Mayor, enter Council chambers and visit the new PAB to meet Chief Charlie Beck — just one of many examples of Mini Mounties pulling together what resources they do have to make an unforgettable time for the students. “Do you remember the first time you went to Disneyland?” says Vincent. “Once you walk through that tunnel and see, hear and smell everything around you, you transcend into another world. It’s like a dream, especially to these kids.”

Every holiday season, Mounted Platoon and Metro officers donate gifts to be given to the students at these two schools. “Some of these kids don’t open their presents right away, Vincent adds heartbreakingly. “Since it will be the only present they receive and want to wait and open it at home on Christmas day.”

With a Little Help

With so much success and excitement



Back row, Ofcr. Sig Lo, student worker, Terry Venatta, Sgt. Javier Arenado and Leo Politi teacher Jenny Guzman treat these deserving kids to a beautiful day and exciting game at Dodger Stadium.



Once a shy bunch, the kids candidly show off their smiles and silly sides while at Knott’s.

that the program offers both officers and kids, it’s no wonder they’re aiming to expand and assist more kids in building positive futures. Today, Mini Mounties officers continue working hard for these deserving kids, whether that’s committing to outings or raising funds through barbecues and trail rides like the one they are hosting on July 17 (a portion of the proceeds benefit the program) — all while staying focused on their daily task of protecting and serving the city.

The nonprofit Eagle & Badge Foundation has donated to the program, helping them to host additional events.

Many have suggested getting Mini

Mounties T-shirts made for the kids as a reward for their hard work (and hopefully catch the attention of other under-privileged kids, motivating them to work hard for one, too). “The T-shirts would also help identify the kids during events,” adds Vincent. It’s here that we see the program is not only serving its purpose to motivate kids, but despite their seemingly dismal surroundings is helping to improve their lives for the better.

Ready to Get Involved?

We salute the efforts of the officers involved with the Mini Mounties pro-

gram. It’s truly inspiring that officers of all divisions are doing what they can to bring some peace and joy to the communities they serve. Your contributions are greatly needed and appreciated. You can donate to the Mini Mounties program by calling Sergeant **Mike Porter** at (213) 485-5909. For information on how you can become an Eagle & Badge member to help support programs like the Mini Mounties, please see the Eagle & Badge Blotter on page 29. ❖