

Blue Bridges Initiative hopes to bring officers, kids closer

By **Jim Herr** - March 30, 2018



Teachers from Cleveland Hill Middle School compete against Cheektowaga Police Officers at a volleyball game on March 29th. The game is part of The Blue Bridges Initiative. (Jim Herr/Cheektowaga Chronicle)

CHEEKTOWAGA – Two Cheektowaga Police officers have partnered with a Cheektowaga marketing agency to help bridge the gap between town police officers and young people.

The homegrown idea is called [The Blue Bridges Initiative](#) and its the brainchild of Sgt. Caleb Harte, Officer Justin Haag, and Jacob Becker of Marketing Mayor.

“We’re trying to get to kids long before there are any issues and let them know we’re here to help, let them know we’re regular people and that we want to be here to help them in their community,” said Mr. Haag.

Officers from the afternoon and midnight shifts are introduced to the kids through activities co-sponsored by town schools. The Blue Bridges Initiative partnered with Cleveland Hill Middle School to host the latest teachers vs. officers volleyball game Thursday afternoon. Students were able to hang around and interact with officers following the game.

"They're the ones often who are responding to the calls when the kids are at home at night, and we want those kids to feel comfortable with the police officers that they see driving around in their neighborhood," added Mr. Haag. "We're trying to involve all the schools, and so far we've had excellent participation. All the teachers, all the administrators, they're all onboard. We really think this could be a way to change some of the perceptions of police officers and introduce them to the kids."

Similar activities have been held at Cheektowaga Central and an event is being planned at Maryvale.

"I don't want to say that we're 0-2 because I think we really beat Central, but there's no doubt [Cleve-Hill] beat us today," said Mr. Haag.

The trio is also behind [the Blue Mittens Project](#) which makes sure needy families have a happy Christmas. They also pioneered Blue Beginnings – a big brother type of program which will partner an officer to talk to a student at the school's suggestion.

"[Officers] might be able to do an intervention with a young man or young woman who is kind of walking the line where they might be starting to get into trouble or hanging out with the wrong crowd. We want to have them know who the police officers are and know that there is support out there for them," added Mr. Haag. "It helps our officers too. I can't say that enough. It's easy to hate from afar, but in this particular instance we want our officers and the kids to know each other and know some of the struggles that both are going through so that they can help identify with each other."





