Local police, Downingtown students host food drive May 22

MediaNews Group
May 13, 2021

DOWNINGTOWN — On Saturday, May 22, a group of African American students from Downingtown Area School District (DASD) and officers from local police departments will join together in a “Making Connections” food drive to benefit local families and food banks. All community members are invited to donate and learn more about the Making Connections program.

DASD's Making Connections organization began the summer of 2020. After the death of George Floyd, DASD parent and employee, Shanette Bernard, reflected on how she could create change in her own community. “As a Black woman and the daughter of a police officer, I wanted to dispel the fear that ‘all cops are bad,’ while also helping to humanize the African American community for our local law enforcement,” Bernard explained.

Armed with cookies, chocolate-covered pretzels and an optimistic attitude, Bernard began with her local law enforcement. “I went to our local police departments and spoke with each of the chiefs for over an hour,” Bernard continued. “We talked about what was happening in our country and reflected on how we could work together to learn, grow and improve our community to build a better future for our youth.”

Chester County law enforcement jumped at the opportunity and quickly joined forces with Bernard to develop the program. Uwchlan Township Police Chief Scott Alexander elaborated, “Working in partnership with the community is an incredibly important aspect of successful law enforcement, and happens to be the keystone of the Uwchlan Township Police Department Mission Statement.”

Upper Uwchlan Police Chief John D. DeMarco added, “The Upper Uwchlan Police Department acknowledges that its effectiveness depends upon the acceptance of its authority and approval of its actions by the Community. Citizens must feel that there is legitimacy of the actions of the
When school began in the fall, Bernard’s son, Evan, a senior at Downingtown STEM Academy, took the charge to his classmates, inviting them to meet via Zoom with police to ask questions and learn about law enforcement while also creating relationships with the officers. Together, the students and police officers conceived the Making Connections program. Evan explained, “the group's purpose is to create connections between African American teens and local law enforcement through ongoing community-based activities and conversations. The hope is that the meaningful relationships fostered in this program will lead to stronger foundations for the future.”

Downingtown High School West liaison, junior Lauren Tinson, joined Making Connections to bridge the gap between African American youth and local law enforcement, stating, “I believe that this program is not only an opportunity for self-growth, but also growth within our schools and communities.”

Uwchlan Township Police Chief Alexander agreed, adding, “I'm grateful for the opportunity to have our officers engage personally with the students participating in the ‘Making Connections’ program, so that we may have an opportunity to build relationships and further our collective desire for our citizens to be treated with respect, fairness and sensitivity. I also look forward to working with the students on programs such as the upcoming food drive, as these events will give us an opportunity to work together as we strive to give back to the community.”

Chief DeMarco echoed the importance of community relationships, stating, “I think the program is important as it offers an opportunity to have an open dialogue with members of the community. This program opens the door to discussions that will offer opportunities to discuss topics that can affect relationships. When having these discussions, a lot of good information is discovered. Misconceptions get erased. Relationships are formed that are critical to the core values of assuring a strong quality of life for everyone. Programs like Making Connections provide the road map to working towards understanding and maintaining a solid working relationship with the community.”

Downingtown High School East junior Matteo D'Addezio remarked, “With STEM, Downingtown East and Downingtown West ... we have many strong leaders that will pave the way for many years of bonding between African Americans and police.”
Currently, officers from West Brandywine Police Department, Uwchlan Police Department, Upper Uwchlan Police Department, East Brandywine Police Department and Downingtown Borough Police Department participate in the monthly Making Connections meetings. The group meets via Zoom with more than 20 African American teens from all three of DASD’s high schools. The group hopes to continue with more in-person activities as pandemic restrictions ease in Chester County.

The Making Connections Food Drive will take place on Saturday, May 22 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Lionville Middle School (550 W. Uwchlan Ave, Exton, PA 19343). Needs include non-perishable goods, personal care items and grocery store gift cards. Donations will benefit the Chester County Food Bank, the Lord's Pantry and DASD families in need.