

GOOD WILL for Justice

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There was no mistaking the visiting team as the Harlem Globetrotters when they stepped on basketball courts in schools along the upper Yukon River. Some wore hiking boots, others wore long underwear. Much of their on-court play still produced a lot of laughs, but most of it was unintentional antics due to rusty basketball skills. The players were of different skill level and ages – all of them older than the kids and young adults they played and lost to in Tanana, Galena and Nulato. Nonetheless, the basketball games were a great way to end the three days a large group of federal and state law enforcement and probation officers spent getting to know their rural communities and giving villagers a glimpse of the people behind the badges.

To many in Tanana, Ruby, Galena, Kaltag, and Nulato, it was a bit intimidating seeing such a large law enforcement presence in their tiny villages on Feb. 23-25. The group – which consisted of FBI agents from Fairbanks and Anchorage, Alaska State Troopers, Alaska Wildlife Troopers, Village Public Safety Officers, juvenile probation officers and adult probation officers, and two Deputy U.S.

Marshals – was not there to haul people away. Instead, they were there to open up the lines of communication between people in these Interior villages and the men and women sworn to protect them. As many as 21 people participated in what was dubbed the Interior Alaska Community Oriented Policing Program. All of them had a wealth of experience to pull from when talking to people at community meetings and school visits.

“I wasn’t expecting this many,” John

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Children in Nulato ended a traditional Native dancing performance by asking the visitors to join them on the last dance.

Riddle, principal at the Galena Interior Learning Academy, said about the group of officers at a school assembly for about 150 students from different Alaska villages attending the residential secondary vocational school. The visitors took turns talking about why and how they got into a career in law enforcement.

There were some among the large group that know firsthand the difficulties youth go through while growing up in the village. VPSO Sgt. Jody Potts, the VPSO coordinator for the Tanana Chiefs Conference, is a Gwich'in Athabascan from the upriver village of Eagle. Some of the people she grew up with have since succumbed to the troubles she witnessed.

“Some are dead, some are in jail, some are addicts,” she said. She became a VPSO as a way to help her people. “As a Native, I really want to see our people do more than survive. I want to see them thrive.”

Alaska Wildlife Trooper Darrell Hildebrand, who is based in Galena, overcame many of his own hardships to eventually become a trooper at the age of 33. Along the way, Hildebrand ran into many people who knew him as a boy growing up in Nulato and were proud of the upstanding man he grew into despite his troubled youth. There were other Alaska Natives on the trip to



Alaska State Trooper Robert Nunley throws T-shirts to a crowd of spectators watching a game between the visiting law enforcement officers and Tanana high schoolers at the school gym on Feb. 23, 2014.



From left, FBI Special Agent Kurt Ormberg, Anchorage Police Officer Dawn Neer and Juvenile Probation Officer Diana Dillard react to a Nulato child's animated stocking hat before a community meeting on Feb. 25, 2014.



Alaska State Trooper Jay Sears, on left, and Lt. Lonny Piscoya, far right, sit with elders Alda Frank and Virginia Johnston before a community meeting in Galena on Feb. 24, 2014.

include Adult Probation Officer Sheri White who's family is from Beaver and Fort Yukon; Deputy U.S. Marshal Scott Ireton, one of two Alaska Natives with the U.S. Marshals Service; and D Detachment Deputy Commander Lt. Lonny Piscoya, an Inupiaq from Nome.

Piscoya said the idea for the visits came up a few months ago. It included some of the same partnering agencies that were among an effort to do sex offender registry compliance checks and warrant arrests in Southwestern villages in 2010. Unlike the earlier campaign, this effort was more of a goodwill tour. It took months of planning, but it was something that many felt it was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

"It's important for me to come out here and see village life," said FBI Special Agent Kurt Ormberg, who supervises units investigating violent crimes such as kidnapping, sex trafficking and gangs. Ormberg transferred from the Lower 48 to the Anchorage FBI office six months ago.

At the community meetings with adults, there were few topics too delicate to discuss.

As Dawn Neer, an Anchorage Police Officer on loan to the FBI to concentrate on combating sex trafficking, explained at some of the community meetings, she has yet to investigate any cases where young girls from the Interior

villages were being used by pimps in urban areas. She would like to keep it that way.

"There's a big push to investigate these crimes," Neer said. She urged parents to be especially mindful of their youngsters' travel plans and partners when journeying to the big city because of recent Anchorage cases where village girls were being used to recruit other girls from the village. "If someone is getting invited into Anchorage for reasons that sounds too good to be true, they could be recruited into sex trafficking."

One topic that came up at every meeting was how to help troubled youth in the villages. An idea that was discussed with juvenile probation representatives was having a tribal court pass judgment on some of the lesser offenses and using circle sentencing, a method of getting the community involved in doling out punishment for the offender. This way the bad behavior could be curtailed before the youngsters become a part of the state system.

Regardless, the group got an earful from the villagers.

"It just seems that there are two standards of justice in this state – urban justice and rural justice," said a man at the community meeting in Galena.

From the perspective of Alaska State Troopers, Piscoya said he's confident that

his troopers who are tasked with providing public safety in the remote villages are doing a good job of handling case workload, especially when his Fairbanks area troopers are sometimes so busy they jump from call to call without getting a chance to concentrate on cases like his rural troopers do.

Similarly, Ormberg pointed out that many times people don't get a chance to see the efforts going on behind the scene such as intercepting drugs in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

"What we do out of Anchorage is to keep them from coming into villages," Ormberg said. "When it gets to the village, it makes a huge impact. We realize that."

However, as Piscoya noted, there is always room for improvement.

Pictured in the middle, Deputy U.S. Marshal Mick Bunn shows 4-year-old Destiny Frankson how to wind up a balsa plane after the basketball game in Galena on Feb. 24, 2014.

Alaska State Trooper Robert Nunley and Alaska Wildlife Trooper Darrel Hildebrand answer questions about their uniform and duty equipment to a group of Nulato school children on Feb. 25, 2014.



John Riddle, principal at the Galena Interior Learning Academy, introduces the visitors during a school assembly on Feb. 24, 2014.



"We could always do better and be more community oriented," Piscoya said when trying to express that this was an effort they were trying to build upon and this was just the start. He anticipates more multi-agency visits to Interior villages in the future.

Then, at the end of each day full of meetings and school visits, the visitors put together a basketball team, complete with jerseys provided by the Fraternal Order of Alaska State Troopers, to face off against a team of youngsters. In Nulato, which doesn't field a high school team, the visitors played

From the left, Village Public Safety Officer Phil Plessinger and Tanana resident Cynthia Erickson scoop ice cream into a cone for Alaska State Trooper Tom Mealey and local kids at an ice cream and pizza social after the basketball game in Tanana on Feb. 23, 2014. The Tanana Chiefs Conference Community Health Outreach Program supplied pizzas, snacks and healthy drinks the group flew in for village kids.



a group that regularly gets together for pick-up games before playing a group of kids that consisted of junior high and high school students.

Some villagers were initially skeptical about stepping onto the court with a bunch of older and burlier officers. It was quickly replaced by eagerness to go toe-to-toe – or rather elbow-to-elbow – with troopers, FBI agents, VPSOs and probation officers. The pain and bruising they inflicted upon the visiting team was about the same as what the visitors inflicted upon themselves.

“I got kneed in the thigh,” Hildebrand said after the first game of the tour in Tanana left him sore. “The

Pictured in the middle, FBI Special Agent Kurt Ormberg goes up for the hook shot over a young opponent during a basketball game in Nulato on Feb. 25, 2014.

Below, Village Public Safety Officer Sgt. Jody Potts drives around a young opponent during a match up with Tanana high schoolers on Feb. 23, 2014.



kid said, ‘It’s not every day that you get to beat up on a trooper.’”

Many of the officers hadn’t stepped onto the court in several years. Robert Nunley, a trooper based in Galena, and Nulato VPSO Jack McCrary, had never played an organized game of basketball before. Nonetheless, they enthusiastically took the court in front of people that usually just get to see them in a more serious uniform. The home crowd cheered loudly when they both sunk a basket during a game against adults in Nulato on the last night of the trip.

Meanwhile, Hildebrand and Ormberg showed they could still hang with the youngsters. Hildebrand hit many threes and Ormberg, who was on his college



basketball team many years ago, crashed the boards like a kid despite being hindered by hiking boots. In the end, the visiting team got beat each night. Even when 6-foot-5 Galena senior Joshua Prokopiof ended a 58-32 drumming with a slam dunk, the visitors took the worst defeat of the trip in stride and congratulated each opponent on a good, friendly game.

But the highlight of the trip was when a group of kids donned traditional Athabascan clothes and danced for their visitors after a covered dish meeting at the Nulato Community Center. On the last dance, the kids and their leaders pulled the visitors out of their seats to join them. While the words the children chanted were indiscernible to the strangers, the gesture was universally known as one of unity. 🏀

Alaska Wildlife Trooper Darrell Hildebrand looks for a teammate to pass the ball to during a basketball game with Galena high schoolers on Feb. 24, 2014.

