

Officer Outreach Program Shatters Stereotypes

BY JAMES MAGDEN

Elk Creek, Alberta – Any mention of teenagers and police officers in the same setting generally conjures up images of wild house parties getting busted—which is precisely the image Sgt. Karin Occino wants to change.

Starting September 1, the Alberta Police Station is organizing daily office hours, officially known as “Officer Hours,” that place a designated sergeant at the high school for an hour each day in an effort to improve relations between teens and the police in town.

“There wasn’t always such a strained relationship with the kids in this town,” said Occino. “A few years ago, the majority of teens and youths knew most of the officers by name and viewed them as a source of protection. Now it seems like we’re distrusted—seen only as the bad guy that comes out and ruins their fun. That’s not how it’s supposed to be.”

Senior class president Carly Roy fully endorses the idea: “Having access to an officer who can answer our questions and just maintain a presence in the school will be a really great step toward keeping things friendly between us and the cops. They won’t just be these stiff, mean people who are out to get us. It won’t be an ‘us vs. them’ thing anymore.”

Officers Roger Filmore, Cecilia Moore, and Guy Perrier have already volunteered to spend time in the high school’s guidance office from 3 to 4 pm and talk to students on a first-come, first-served basis.

“I remember being a kid,” said Sgt. Filmore, “and if you don’t know an officer personally, it’s really easy to see us as intimidating or as jerks, depending on what you’ve been hearing from other kids, siblings, or parents. I don’t want there to be any kids who don’t come to us because they think we don’t care. We’re not just here to stop crime; we’re here to keep you safe in every way possible, even if that just means giving advice.”

This initiative comes after the Police Commission revealed statistics that indicate the number of infractions issued to youths and teens in town has more than doubled over the last five years.

Alberta High School Principal Hillary Souza says she worked with Sgt. Occino on the initiative and she couldn’t be happier that the idea has come to fruition.

“This is a wonderful idea. Not to shine my own shoes here, but I think it’s just what these kids need,” said Souza. “There have been some students here in the past who have gone astray, unfortunately. I know for a fact that, if they had had a positive authority figure present, they would have stayed on the right track.”

This has been designated as a school program and will not be coordinated by the town, police, or Board of Education. It is, rather, a volunteer-run initiative for the benefit of the town's students.

For more information on Officer Hours, please contact Sgt. Occino at 587.555.0198.