EAGER TO SERVE

Students learn about police, firefighting at Anna Maria event

Nicole Shih
Telegram & Gazette

PAXTON — Everyone has their own story on why they want to become a police officer or a firefighter. Carla Febus Romero, a soon-to-be freshman at Anna Maria College and a Worcester resident, said she’s a rape survivor. She was raped by family members twice when she was 5, and so was her mother. The trauma was the reason she decided to become a criminal justice officer with a concentration in human trafficking to make sure justice will be served for herself, her mother and other girls suffering from sexual abuse.

“As I got older, I also found out I was, I guess you could say, a product or a rape baby,” Romero said. “I feel like (I’m) giving back to my mother because she never got justice, so I’m getting justice for her.”

Romero was one of about 45 high school and college students attending a two-day public safety program hosted by Anna Maria College dubbed the “Battle of the Badges.” Thursday and Friday at the college.

The program is designed for students who are considering a career in criminal justice including forensic criminology, law and society and prelaw; and fire science including paramedic science and emergency management.

The program kicked off with the remarks of several officials including Worcester District Attorney Joseph D. Early Jr., retired Worcester Fire Chief Gerard Dio, retired Connecticut State Police Master Sgt. Michael Nockunas and Mike Stevens, director of the criminal justice and law enforcement program at Anna Maria. Throughout the program, attendees participated in hands-on learning and demonstrations were held by expert instructors from federal, state and community agencies, including Worcester Police Sgt. Shawn Barbale.

SWAT demonstration

The SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) demonstration of several public safety weapons included a 40mm less-lethal launcher that can fire a foam projectile and assist officers in controlling violent individuals with less likelihood to injure both the subject and officers.
seriously; an extended-stick camera allowing police officers to keep a safe distance from the crime scene; a taser to overcome resistance while conducting an arrest; a defense shield and a gas mask.

George Floyd and Enmanuel Familia

When former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, by holding his knee on Floyd’s neck, the outrage spread across the nation.
The other three officers involved in the death of Floyd — Thomas Lane, Tou Thao and J. Alexander Kueng — were fired and charged with a variety of crimes.
And locally, Worcester police Officer Enmanuel Familia, 38, lost his life while trying to rescue three teens who were struggling to stay above water in a pond at Green Hill Park.
Both the tragedies of Floyd and Familia put a spotlight on first responders, Stevens said.
“Locally, Manny was a student at Anna Maria at the time of his death. He was my student. I had him in my class. So his loss was very tough on all of us here,” Stevens said. “The murder of George Floyd, racial and social justice issues are openly discussed in our classrooms, and we want to discuss them as part of our value-based, liberal arts education.”

Yet, the modest growth of enrollment in criminal justice and fire science departments can been seen.
The undergraduate enrollment of the criminal justice department is up 9.6% from last year. Enrollment increased from 167 in 2020 to 183 students this year. The fire science department shows a 3.7% increase in 2021 compared to last year’s enrollment, which is an increase from 219 to 227 students this year.
The graduate level at Anna Maria College has experienced a significant growth as well.
Since 2018, applications to the master’s degree program in criminal justice at the college have increased by over 400%.
“I’m optimistic that the incredible courage and support shown by our first responders during the pandemic will inspire more young people to explore undergraduate degrees in these helping professions, but it’s too soon to see any trends on that,” Stevens said.

Importance of education

On Thursday morning, officials were sharing remarks with students, highlighting the importance of education in being a police officer or a firefighter.
Early, who had also taught at Anna Maria, talked about the importance of police being educated, saying that the more students get from their education, the more they can handle issues in the real world.
He said it would help them defuse a situation when facing a person with mental health issues, autism or any racial or inequity problems.
“These are important,” Early said. “I wish I had been to a program like this.”
Nockunas also reinforced that “it’s all about education” when he recalled the time when he was 19 applying to
the Connecticut State Police and had to compete with 5,000 students for 50 slots. Everything was all about education and that is the secret tool that people need today, Nockunas said.

Careers ahead for students

Jordan Clarke, a senior at Leicester High School, said she would like to pursue a career as a homicide detective. She said she's interested in American history and especially history related to terrorism, genocide and homicide.

Caitlin Andrews, a senior at St. Paul Diocesan Junior Senior High School, said she is leaning toward becoming a firefighter as she always has a passion for helping people.

“I want to make a difference somehow and try to impact many lives as positively as I can,” Andrews said. Romero said it was not until fifth grade that she first spoke up about her “nightmare.” And as time has gone on she has become more determined about her career plans. And more importantly, she said, justice needs to be served.

“I hope that within the four years that I’m here (at Anna Maria College), probably longer, I make a difference, and I help someone,” she said.