

THE BEDFORD CITIZEN

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

JULY 11, 2016

Last Friday, the day the news of the horrific sniper attack in Dallas woke us from our sleep, I joined Middlesex County Sheriff Peter Koutoujian and Burlington's Assistant Police Chief Tom Duffy at the graduation of the Sheriff Department's Youth Public Safety Academy (YPSA). Some 50 excited elementary school-aged children, half from Burlington, completed a one-week program that introduced them to the members of the sheriff's department and the police and fire departments of their town.

A few weeks ago, I joined Bedford Fire Chief David Grunes as we welcomed two new fire fighter/paramedics, John Perry and Patrick Stewart. The Department honored many veterans for heroic acts this past year. Many of them saved lives in this past year alone, and several were involved in bringing new lives into the world in emergency childbirth situations. I was honored when I was given a chance to thank the members of the department for their service, both as a resident and as their representative in the legislature.

Here's the tie that binds these events. We live in a community where our first responders have become part of our lives, not just in times of crisis. In Bedford, Burlington and Wilmington, our first responders have organized awareness days focusing on senior care, child safety, and traffic awareness. The Burlington fire department runs a program that checks on seniors and makes sure their smoke detectors are in place. The Bedford department hosts a DNA swabbing program to protect our children. The police departments from both communities have been involved with local volunteers in county-wide programs to combat domestic violence. These are just examples of which I am aware. I know there are more.

The departments participate in fire engine washes and other family friendly events, where we introduce our children to our first responders. Their members come to the schools for Read Across America day. Visits are hosted and made between our police and fire officers and our schools. Our first responders are a part of our lives and we are a part of theirs.

Our communities have been challenged with racial threats, and in these cases our police departments have addressed these situations right away. When the mosque in Burlington was threatened, Chief Mike Kent attended meetings and made sure his invitation to work with its leaders was heard. When incidents of anti-Semitism rocked Bedford, Chief Robert Bonjiorno took a lead role in investigating what had happened and proactively sought ways to reduce the chances of reoccurrence. Our police forces allied themselves with minority groups that historically have lacked power, but working together they made a difference.

So why do I write about this today? Last week we shared the terror of shootings caught on video in Baton Rouge and St. Paul and then the horror of a sniper executing police officers in Dallas in apparent retaliation. It is early in the investigations of all of these killings, but it is obvious that they all occurred amid feelings of insecurity. We should all feel confident that the police are here to create order and calm fears. And the police should feel that when they are doing their job, the community they swore to protect will have their back, rather than shoot at it.

Across the country, people ask what can be done. The answer can be found right here. At events like the YPSA, the fire engine washes and safety seminars, the safety check visits to our homes, and the meals served at our seniors centers, our residents get to know our first responders and our first responders get to know us. Communication is the key. When we all work together, we get to know each other and we feel comfortable. When a call goes to 911 in our communities, it is quite possible that the families at one end of that call, and the officers responding to it, have been acquainted in calmer circumstances and accept each other with appropriate trust.

In the coming weeks, I will invite the chiefs from our community to return for an episode of my cable show, Rappin' With the Rep. We will talk about what our first responders already do to generate communication and security with our communities, and what more can be done. It's an important step and I look forward to working with everyone in town government and our first responders to continue the cooperation that leads to confidence.

State Rep. Ken Gordon (D) Bedford