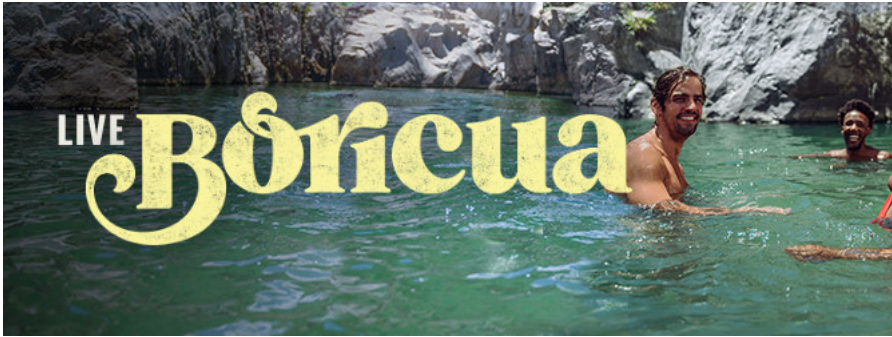


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**NEWS // EDUCATION**

# Interacting with police? Program will teach San Antonio students the basics.



**Elizabeth Sander, Staff writer**

Updated: June 1, 2023 12:19 p.m.



San Antonio Police Tactical Instructor Nathan Sandoval leads students through the dynamics of a traffic stop during an exercise at the San Antonio Police Academy in 2019. Forty students from Sam Houston High School attended the program, designed to help bridge the gap between young folks and police officers and to encourage careers in law enforcement.

Jerry Lara/Staff photographer

In one of the first rounds of “Juvenile Justice Jeopardy,” a game created to help young people and police officers understand each other, a pair of 18-year-olds showed how to de-escalate a conflict.

Jayden Vargas and Jordan Carson, students at Marshall Law and Medical Services High School, were the ones in police uniform caps Wednesday, approaching the game’s creator, Kristen Wheeler, who was supposedly on the side of the road with a flat tire.

Before an audience of police, community stakeholders, educators and students, Wheeler — a Boston lawyer who developed the game for a nonprofit called Strategies For Youth — demonstrated what not to do.

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She screamed, pleaded that she had done nothing wrong, jumped around, got in the officers' faces, and asked repeatedly to call her mom.

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It was exaggerated, garnering laughter from the crowd. The “officers” maintained their calm and asked her how they could help and Wheeler eventually settled down.

Students try on police uniforms caps during the program on Wednesday  
Video: Abigail Im Multimedia producer, Elizabeth Sander

Other students in teacher Emmanuel Hernandez’s senior Practicum in Law class got to play the game. Debate centered on the answers to Jeopardy-style questions such as, “Are the police physically allowed to touch you?” and, “If an officer asks you for your name, but you don’t understand why they need it, what is the first thing you should do?”

The role-playing reinforced lists of “do’s” and “don’t’s” for interacting with police and the whole package will be taken to other schools and other school districts under a partnership of the San Antonio Area African American Community Fund (SAAAACF), the [San Antonio Area Foundation](#) and the San Antonio Police Department.

Ginger Martinez, 10, hands a gift to San Antonio Police SAFE Officer Carlos Guillen during a 911 Remembrance Ceremony at Heritage Elementary School in 2021. First responders from various emergency departments were on hand as they were honored by the students.  
Jerry Lara/San Antonio Express-News

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It's a hoped-for fix to a number of problems, including a rise in local youth crime and the dangers of miscommunication between police and the public, organizers said.

The Strategies for Youth [website](#) says the organization aims to create “developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and racially equitable training” for youth and law enforcement agencies.

“Now, more than ever, we see the consequences of bad interactions between police and the communities they serve,” it states. “When encounters between police and youth go wrong ... all of us pay a steep and sometimes irrecoverable cost. Something is tragically broken.”

SAAAAFC began working to improve relationships between youth and police after the 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis officers and worsening crime, including school incidents, during and after the pandemic, said Bobby Blount, who chairs its board and is a longtime Northside Independent School District trustee.

Other initiatives include Walk a Mile in my Shoes, where police officers and students switch places and role play different scenarios, which Blount said has been successful.

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Wednesday's game ended in a tie. For this demonstration, students were not allowed to pick and choose their Jeopardy categories, instead going from lowest points to highest points in each column, but it usually follows the game show's normal structure, Hernandez said.

It's designed to force students into conversations about how they should act around police, while also explaining how police are supposed to act around them.

For the most part, the Marshall students knew the answers — they're in a Northside magnet program whose first class of seniors graduates this year, many of whom aim to get into law and government careers.

Hernandez and other educators in the program are former police officers themselves. Some students could even name the court cases that helped shape the laws they were discussing, warranting an occasional double-take and fist bump from Wheeler, the host.

That might not be the case when the game is played at other schools. Doug Greene, the SAPD community engagement officer, acknowledged that there may be situations where the game brings out emotion in students, depending on their own history of interactions with police.

That's partly the point, he said.

"This is going to be a good opportunity for some of these kids to get things off of their chest," Greene said. "Whether they agree with the questioning or not, it's going to be healthy for them."

He said the officers' purpose is to listen.

"Officers may assume that the public knows this information, right? It can be an eye opener, and it could change the response of an officer to the public based on these encounters, because what's going on here, is we are communicating with each other," Greene said.

Vargas, one of the student volunteers, said his dad is an SAPD detective.

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“A lot of people think all cops are bad,” Vargas said. “In my opinion, there’s only a handful of police officers that make everyone look bad, because I know my family members, they’re not bad people.”

Videos of police behavior that circulate on social media often don’t show what led to an incident or what happened after, he said, adding that his classes at Marshall cover the nuances of this subject.

“We do talk about both sides of it, you know, and we have an opportunity to share our feelings about what’s going on in society,” Vargas said.

He plans to study cybersecurity at the University of Texas at San Antonio in the fall, with aims to join the Air Force. Both Vargas and Carson, the other student volunteer, found the game helpful, though Carson said it could be patronizing at times, with some of the examples feeling a little out of touch with her and her peers' experience.

But it knocked down barriers people might feel about talking to officers and it avoided “shaming” students, Carson said. She wants to study biological psychology and neuroscience, with aims of working in criminal profiling.

Carson’s favorite question of the day was when the host asked if police could arrest you based on race. The class emphatically said “no.” The host shared statistics on race in San Antonio policing, pointing out that the Black or African American population

is disproportionately targeted at traffic stops.

“It’s an issue,” Carson said. “I think there’s a lot of youth, especially minority youth, that is very fearful, and especially from family members or people that in their community who have dealt with rough interactions with the police.”

She said that she and her generation were helping to establish a boundary against such profiling, and was glad that officer were hearing the students on that score, and agreeing with them.

“Having true adult conversations is really opening us up to the adult world of, ‘You can have good communication with law enforcement officers, and you do not need to fear them,’” she said.

“Respect is earned,” she said. “But it’s also not something that should be taken away.”

*Elizabeth.sander@hearst.com*

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Written By

**Elizabeth Sander**

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Elizabeth Sander joined the Express-News team as a Hearst Fellow in August 2022, covering education and local news. She is a graduate of Columbia University's School of Journalism. Find her previous work in The New York Times, Observer Media, Horse Illustrated and her college newspaper, The Tufts Daily. Elizabeth is originally from Fairfield, CT.

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