

# Supervisor candidates: Change, or status quo?

## Incumbents clash with challengers at forum

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

The three incumbents who are seeking reelection to the county's Board of Supervisors next month – Jim Holland, Leslie Haley and Chris Winslow – each made a slightly different version of the same argument during a candidate forum last Thursday at the Chester campus of John Tyler Community College: Chesterfield has made considerable progress in many areas over the past four years and there's no reason to reverse course now.

"As a wise person once said: 'If it's not broken, don't fix it,'" said Holland, the Dale District's three-term supervisor and currently the lone Democrat on the five-member board.

After decades of Republican dominance in local

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**RAISING THE BREAD SWEETS HAVE A STORY TO TELL AT LA SABROSITA BAKERY**  
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JENNY McQUEEN



JAMES HASKINS

# 'FRIEND OR FOE?'

## With an election looming, the role police officers play in county schools turns political

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

**"W**e need to get the police out of schools."

The words, spoken by Sheila Bynum-Coleman, a Democratic candidate for the 66th House District, punctuate a recent television ad for her opponent: Virginia House of Delegates Speaker Kirk Cox, a Republican who claims Bynum-Coleman supports removing law enforcement officers from public schools.

Bynum-Coleman, however, says the ad distorts her view: She supports deploying police as school resource officers, but thinks they should focus on securing the buildings to which they are assigned and not get involved in student discipline matters.

A mother of five and the daughter of a former Richmond police officer, Bynum-Coleman contends the ad's treatment of her comment – a snippet of her remarks from a 2017 radio interview – purposely mischaracterizes her position to stoke parents' fears about school shootings.

Regardless of who wins the Nov. 5 election,

neither Cox nor Bynum-Coleman will have any direct authority over the role of police officers in Chesterfield schools. The issue, however, has quickly made its way into the public discussion surrounding a hotly contested election.

Emerging questions about the appropriate role of police in schools, and whether they should be there at all, stand in stark contrast to discussions Chesterfield County school and government leaders were engaged in less than a year ago.

A school safety task force convened last year by the Chesterfield School Board in the wake of a deadly Florida school shooting initially considered a proposal to utilize "armed mentors" as security in the county's 39 elementary schools.

The task force abandoned that idea, but issued a series of recommendations last October that included hiring additional armed school resource officers and assigning one to each elementary

Debate over the role of police officers at county schools, such as Monacan High, above, has turned political in the run-up to the Nov. 5 election.

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**POLICE IN SCHOOLS** from page 1

Col. Jeffrey Katz, Chesterfield police chief

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school. Chesterfield, which presently has SROs in each of its 30 middle and high schools, was one of the first school systems in Virginia to deploy sworn police officers in that capacity.

The task force's findings aligned with those of another panel, the House Select Committee on School Safety, chaired by Cox, which last year called for increasing grant funding to localities to hire SROs and allowing recently retired law enforcement officers to serve in such an assignment without jeopardizing their state retirement benefits.

A year later, the conversation is shifting. While only one of the more than 50 candidates seeking office in Chesterfield has advocated for removing armed officers from schools – and no one running for the School Board or Board of Supervisors has taken such a stance – not everyone agrees with how county schools currently are being policed.

**C**hesterfield Commonwealth's Attorney Scott Miles first broached the topic during an August town hall titled "Schools not Jails," claiming the presence of law enforcement officers in schools contributes to a "school-to-prison pipeline" – the tendency for minority, disabled and economically disadvantaged children to become incarcerated at far higher rates than their peers.

Miles, a Democrat, has drawn fire from people who oppose his efforts to implement progressive criminal justice reforms in a historically conservative county.

During a panel discussion at the county's Central Library, Miles suggested the local school system would be better served by using the money it currently spends on SROs to hire additional counselors.

"Anecdotally, we see the causal relationship between the presence of sworn law enforcement officers [in schools] and the referral to our court services unit of cases that used to be handled by school officials without court involvement," he said in an email last week. "I've frequently heard resentment of this phenomenon expressed by leaders and members of communities that have reason to resent the damage that an over-response by their courts can do to a young person."

The county's police chief, Col. Jeffrey Katz, acknowledged in a recent interview that he was "stunned" to learn of Miles' comments at the town hall.

Katz insists opposition to having law enforcement officers in schools is rooted in a misguided premise: that citizens, even school-age children, must be protected from their police department.

"The question is," he said, "do you see the police as friend or foe?"

It's an issue that has been quietly brewing for several years now.

In April 2015, the Washington-based Center for Public Integrity published a study concluding that Virginia had the highest rate in the nation for "referrals to law enforcement" for students who break rules or laws on school grounds.

According to the study, data from the U.S. Department of Education indicated that Virginia schools issued referrals to law enforcement agencies at a rate of 16 per 1,000 students – nearly three times the national rate – during the 2011-12 school year.

Chesterfield had more than 1,700 such referrals that year, the highest number for any school system in the commonwealth.

The Center for Public Integrity's report also noted that black students accounted for 54% of Chesterfield's law enforcement referrals in 2011-12 while representing just 27% of the student population.

At the county's Falling Creek Middle School, which is predominantly made up of black and Hispanic students, the rate of law enforcement referrals was 228 per 1,000 students – among the highest of any school in Virginia.

Following release of the study, Jack Gravely, executive director of the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, claimed such referrals lead to students of color – particularly young black males – being "pushed out, failed out and policed out" of the public education system.

"We should not want to be criminalizing young people," said Gary Broderick, legislative director of RISE for Youth, a nonpartisan campaign that promotes the creation of community-based alternatives to youth incarceration, in an interview earlier this month.

"Police department policies are designed around dealing with adult behavior," Broderick added. "Teens' brains are not as developed as adults' brains – they need to be given room to make mistakes and they need adults to support them. That is not the role police officers play."

County police officials maintain the vast majority of "referrals to law enforcement" don't result in any legal action against a student, and contend the statistics cited in the 2015 study paint a misleading picture of what is happening in Chesterfield schools.

They say the figures reported by the

Department of Education are based on a form called a J-18, which officers use to document events in which there may be probable cause to charge a juvenile with a crime.

The forms typically include a request for one of three actions. The officer can request no action on the J-18, meaning the matter is documented by police, but the officer is asking that the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Courts take no action on it.

The officer also can request an intake conference, a proceeding in which an intake officer meets with the juvenile and his or her family to review and discuss the circumstances of a particular incident. Such conferences are overseen by the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.

Finally, the officer can request that a juvenile petition be issued based on the J-18. Issuance of such a petition is the point at which a juvenile is charged with a criminal offense.

A team of researchers from the Virginia Tech School of Education began analyzing the findings from the Center for Public Integrity study in January 2016 and determined that the rate of Virginia students who wound up in court as a result of school-based law enforcement referrals was just 2.4 per 1,000.

"The idea that police officers are roaming the halls with their knuckles dragging on the ground, looking for kids to arrest, is a myopic view," Katz said. "We're there to protect kids, not only physically but emotionally, and give them a sense of safety."

**B**roderick thinks the issue boils down to funding – that in lieu of investing in the infrastructure and human capital needed to meet the diverse emotional and psychological needs of all children, Chesterfield and other school systems have deployed SROs as a relatively inexpensive answer to a complex problem.

Rather than hiring counselors and social workers and significantly reducing class sizes so teachers can give students individual attention, all of which would require dramatic increases in school budgets, he says localities "pack kids into classrooms and manufacture situations where there is going to be more misbehavior."

"Teachers reaching for the option they have available is not the problem," Broderick added. "Teachers need to have staff they can call to help deal with discipline issues. They need people trained in de-escalation and adolescent brain development, not people who are trained to respond to criminal behavior."

Chesterfield County Public Schools launched programs in trauma-informed care and positive behavior intervention four years ago after it and other Richmond-area school systems were cited for disproportionately referring black students to law enforcement.

The goal is to reduce such referrals and out-of-school suspensions and keep children in the classroom by changing the lens through which staff view student behavior.

"When you are able to build relationships and talk to kids, that's how you know the difference between Johnny is just having a bad day and doesn't want to participate,

and something terrible happened to Johnny and it has manifested in his behavior," said Carrie Coyner, a School Board member and candidate for the 62nd House District, in an interview with the Observer last year.

As of last year, Chesterfield was the only school system in Virginia that had devoted a full-time employee to trauma-informed care training. But with more than 60,000 students and increasing poverty in some schools, school officials know one person isn't nearly enough.

Connie Honsinger, the school system's trauma-informed care training and intervention specialist, told members of the County-Schools Liaison committee in June 2018 that the school system needed to hire 64 counselors, 32 psychologists, 32 social workers and four trauma-informed care specialists – at an annual cost of \$8.6 million.

Miles, who was elected last November to serve the remaining year left on the term of retired Commonwealth's Attorney Billy Davenport, noted the school system could fund several of those positions by redirecting money that's currently allocated to the Police Department for 30 SRO salaries and benefits.

"It's unrealistic to expect SROs not to react to situations like law enforcement officers – that's what they're trained to do," Miles said. "But having them in schools is how low-level cases end up in court. My perspective is most of them should be handled in-house."

Chesterfield Police Maj. Brad Badgerow, supervisor of the department's SRO program, said the officers who are assigned to county schools do much more than simply enforce criminal offenses.

According to Badgerow, about a third of Chesterfield's SROs are coaches of sports teams, and an even greater number participate in clubs and extracurricular activities in their schools. Many work closely with in-school programs that aim to encourage dialogue between students and law enforcement.

SROs also provide classroom instruction in topics such as critical thinking, decision-making and communication skills. They taught more than 8,500 students during the 2018-19 school year, Badgerow noted.

Amid questions about the role of law enforcement in schools, Katz wants to increase opportunities for officers to mentor students by converting SRO positions into Police Athletic League coaches as part of a pilot program – one goal of which is to replace the school to prison pipeline with a "school to squad pipeline," creating positive connections between officers and children, some of whom might go on to consider careers in law enforcement.

"If you take police officers out of schools, you lose the ability to cultivate those positive relationships with children," Katz said.

**B**ynum-Coleman, who is black, claimed at a recent candidate forum that for students of color, interactions with law enforcement in Chesterfield schools far too often are negative experiences.

"Chesterfield County has a problem with sending more black and brown kids to police referrals," she said. "We have seen time and time again where black

and brown kids are being mistreated by police officers in schools, where their white counterparts are not for committing the same offenses.”

Concerns over school resource officers and possible racial profiling aren't new. In July 2018, the school system dismissed its safety and security manager, Donald Green, after citizens alerted school officials to controversial posts he allegedly made to his Facebook account.

The posts were captured via screenshot and shared on social media by people who viewed them as expressing racist or anti-Muslim sentiments.

Green had supported a proposal to deploy former or retired law enforcement officers as “armed security mentors” in Chesterfield’s elementary schools. Following his termination, and in the face of vehement opposition from some community members, the school safety task force decided not to go forward with the plan.

In April, following a monthlong investigation, the Chesterfield Police Department terminated the employment of an officer, Daniel Morley, who had worked as an SRO at L.C. Bird High School before being publicly linked to a white supremacist organization.

According to the Virginia Department of Education, 60% of Bird’s students were black or Hispanic during the 2018-19 school year.

When he announced Morley’s firing, Katz noted that “policing in today’s polarized society is challenging” and said it requires “relationships rooted in trust.”

“I’m not going to tell you that everyone in the schools has done the job perfectly, but the Police Department takes care of issues expeditiously,” said Kevin Carroll, a retired Chesterfield police officer and Republican candidate for the Matoaca District’s seat on the Board of Supervisors.

Since learning of Miles’ comments about SROs, Carroll has expressed concern that Democrats who agree with Miles could gain a majority on the Board of Supervisors and force Katz to remove the officers from county schools under threat of termination.

At a recent Matoaca District candidate forum hosted by the Winterpock Elementary PTA, Carroll promised parents that if elected, he’ll make sure Katz has adequate funding to continue the SRO program.

“If someone comes through that door [with bad intentions], we have to have an officer there to stop them and save your kids,” he said.

Carroll’s opponent, Democrat Shajuan Mason, insisted keeping students, teachers and staff safe is her No. 1 priority.

“As a parent – I have three boys myself – the last thing you want to think about is sending your children to school and the unthinkable happens,” she said at the Winterpock forum. “In the good old days, you went to school to learn, you played on the playground and you went home. That’s not the case anymore.”

**B**ehind the scenes, a conversation about the role police officers play within county schools has been ongoing. For more than a year, Chesterfield police and school officials have been negotiating the terms of an updated

memorandum of understanding (MOU) regarding the school resource officer program.

The current MOU was signed by former county police chief Thierry Dupuis and former school superintendent Marcus Newsome in 2016.

The following year, police officials began meeting with Newsome’s successor, James Lane, to determine whether the document needed to be updated and brought into alignment with a model MOU issued by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services in May 2017.

In late August 2019, Lane’s successor, Merv Daugherty, told members of the County-Schools Liaison committee the two sides still “were not close” to an agreement on a new MOU.

“We’re trying to work together, but I don’t see us coming to an understanding any time soon, just because of the difference of philosophy right now,” Daugherty said.

Neither side has been willing to discuss specifics of their respective proposals, citing the ongoing negotiations.

While School Board Chairman Rob Thompson acknowledged Chesterfield schools are safer because of the school system’s “strong working relationship” with the Police Department, he called it “troubling” that the two organizations haven’t agreed on an updated MOU nearly a year after the school safety task force issued its recommendations.

“Every day that goes by is a day that we waste in our efforts to enhance the protection of our community’s most important asset: our children,” Thompson said.

According to County Administrator Joe Casey, it’s a question of whether the MOU should serve as a policy with general guidelines or a more detailed operations manual that governs the conduct of SROs while on school property.

Casey noted the current police-schools MOU is three pages and the school system’s most recent proposed MOU was 11 pages.

“We put our faith in Col. Katz and his team to best define law enforcement, what they think that rightful relationship is with schools,” he said.

“Our officers are provided extensive training to do their jobs and no MOU should define or limit their professional duties,” added Leslie Haley, chairwoman of the Board of Supervisors.

Broderick, the legislative director from RISE for Youth, said one of the problems with SROs is they don’t answer to school administrators even though they are deployed on school property.


But Katz insisted he will not sign any MOU that compromises the Police Department’s chain of command and would refuse any directive from the Board of Supervisors to remove SROs from Chesterfield schools.

“If that’s a cause for replacing me, so be it,” he said.

Katz, a Florida native, worked for four years as a police officer in Parkland, Florida, the site of the February 2018 shooting rampage at Stoneman Douglas High School that left 17 dead and many more injured.

“This is deeply personal for me,” he added. “I’m not going to abandon the children in my community.” ■

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**EFFECTIVE FEB. 1, 2019**, five voting precincts in Chesterfield County were split in order to alleviate overcrowding and make the voting experience more efficient. If you previously voted at the Iron Bridge, Genito, Southside, Winfrees Store or Skinquarter precincts, your polling location may have changed.

**Additionally, some polling locations have changed:**


- Those who voted at Etrick Elementary School, you will now vote at the Multi-Purpose Center at Virginia State University, 20809 2nd Avenue.
- Those who voted at the Bon Air Community House, you will now vote at St. Michael’s Episcopal Church, 2040 McRae Road.
- Those who voted at Southside Baptist Church, the church is now named the Transformation Church, 6000 Iron Bridge Road.
- Those who voted at United Methodist Church, you will now vote at Five Forks Village Clubhouse, 8301 Five Forks Lane.
- Those who voted at Reams Road Elementary School, you will now vote at North Courthouse Road Library, 325 Courthouse Road.
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# Observer

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## No more midterms?

### Schools weigh major changes to student grading, testing

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

The snow Chesterfield experienced during early December's winter storm has long since melted, but its impact may be felt at Chesterfield County Public Schools for years to come.

Chesterfield County Public Schools ultimately abandoned the midterms that were scheduled to take place during the snow days, and now school officials are exploring whether midterms and finals should become a thing of the past.

At the School Board's work session last Tuesday, as one of his last acts as CCPS' chief academic officer, Thomas Taylor presented some possible sweeping changes to how student performance reporting and recognition is conducted.

"We lost nothing and gained everything," Taylor said of the decision to cancel December midterms at CCPS.

Taylor – who was named the school system's new chief of staff later that evening – went on to outline other proposed changes to Chesterfield's

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COURTESY OF BILL DOERKEN



ASH DANIEL

## Help Wanted

### To bolster dwindling ranks, Police Department proposes salary increases for longtime officers

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

New Chesterfield police recruits engage in training exercises last week at the Eanes-Pittman Public Safety Training Center.

Patrol officer Will Jackson has spent more than half his life with the Chesterfield County Police Department.

After two years with the Virginia Department of Corrections, Jackson joined the Chesterfield force in October 1993 – part of a wave of new public safety employees hired from the mid-1980s through the early '90s to serve the county's rapidly growing population. Even now, nine months shy of his 50th birthday, he's in no rush to leave.

"I don't feel burned out. I enjoy my job and am still enthusiastic about going to work," Jackson said during an interview last week.

Still, he was thinking about submitting his retirement papers this December, when he

becomes eligible for a full Virginia Retirement System pension, until he learned about the Police Department's new plan to retain its most experienced employees.

The initiative, which Police Chief Col. Jeffrey Katz presented to the Board of Supervisors during a budget work session last Wednesday, would provide significant salary increases for the Police Department's longest-serving employees as an incentive to delay retirement at a time when the department is struggling to staff all of its patrol beats.

To fund the salary increases, the board is expected to approve \$950,000 for the fiscal year that begins July 1. Additional installments of

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\$300,000 in fiscal years 2021 through 2023 will bring the program's total four-year price tag to \$1.85 million.

"While that level of investment may feel like a lot at first glance, keeping those people here and having a more skilled workforce for that amount of money is significantly less than it would cost to replace them and train their replacements," said Meghan Coates, director of the county's Budget and Management Department, during the budget work session.

According to Kevin Carroll, a recently retired Chesterfield police officer and president of the county Fraternal Order of Police, it costs the county \$130,000 to recruit, test and train one prospective officer through the end of the 34-week police academy.

"It's a big expense," Carroll said in an interview last week. "It's in the county's best interests to retain employees once we train them."

That's particularly true at a time of significant declines in the number of people interested in pursuing careers in law enforcement, both locally and nationwide.

The Chesterfield Police Department says employment applications have declined in recent years. Despite aggressive recruiting efforts, the department received 1,798 applications for sworn officer positions in 2018. That was down from 2,017 as recently as 2010. A little more than 300 of last year's applicants made it through pre-screening and took the battery of aptitude, physical and psychological tests administered to every prospective officer.

For perspective, Carroll recalled that when he traveled from his native Rhode Island to Chesterfield to take his initial test for the Police Department in 1986, he was one of more than 700 people testing just that day.

"It's not like it was years ago – now we have to send recruiters to other states just to get people to apply," he said.

The county's Police Department has a budgeted allocation of 535 full-time sworn officer positions. It currently has about 500 sworn officers, including recruits in the police academy, as well as about 100 civilian employees.

"We have not been fully staffed as an agency in over a decade. That's an issue we need to address," Katz told the Board of Supervisors.

Police administrators across the country have cited several reasons for the shrinking pool of applicants, including greater scrutiny of police officers' actions – many localities, including Chesterfield, now require officers to record video footage via body-worn cameras. Cultural attitudes about police also have become increasingly negative following a series of highly publicized officer-involved shootings of unarmed black men and boys, and other allegations of excessive force.

Police brutality is "one of the things I've been very concerned about, especially with what we've seen nationally," said Dale District Supervisor Jim Holland during an interview last week. "For me,



PHOTOS BY ASH DANIEL

Chesterfield Police Officer Will Jackson, above, was contemplating retirement but decided to stay on thanks to a new incentive program aimed at retaining veteran officers.

New Chesterfield police recruits, right, undergo emergency center training last week.



as an African-American, certainly I'm extremely sensitive to that."

Despite the reduction in applicants, Katz insisted the county's Police Department hasn't relaxed its "strenuous" process for vetting prospective officers. It has, however, increased the starting salary several times to try to remain competitive with other law enforcement agencies within the region and state.

The starting salary for a county police officer has jumped 50 percent over the past 15 years, Katz said. Chesterfield's current starting salary is \$44,289, plus a \$1,500 signing bonus. But salaries for more experienced personnel have not kept pace over that period.

"Every time you raise the starting salary, you're giving a pay raise to people who haven't worked here yet, based on a promise of service," Katz added. "What I want is a department that is mission-focused, that people are excited to be part of and where they know they will be rewarded for being loyal and doing the job at a high level."

Under former Police Chief Col. Thierry Dupuis, the Chesterfield Police Department conducted a comprehensive salary study in 2008 that recommended some of the same changes Katz is now making to address salary compression issues, but the economy went into a tailspin shortly thereafter; faced with significantly reduced local real estate tax revenue, the Board of Supervisors implemented budget

cuts and there was no funding available for new initiatives.

Shortly after Katz took over as Chesterfield's police chief in January 2018, he formed a committee to evaluate the department's compensation structure. The committee recommended salary increases for more experienced personnel to address inequities in the pay system.

As part of that analysis, the department also conducted an online survey of employees at or near retirement age to determine if they were definitely planning to retire, possibly retiring or definitely not retiring within the next year.

Thirty-nine county police employees are eligible to retire as of July 1. According to Elizabeth Caroon, a spokeswoman for the department, a total of 101 will become eligible between today and Dec. 31, 2023.

"It's a brain drain, an experience drain, and that's devastating to any organization," Holland said.

Over the past couple of years, Katz noted, the department has lost an average of four employees per month to retirement. It typically takes between a year and 18 months to fill each vacancy with a fully vetted, qualified and trained officer.

If the new employee retention program takes effect July 1 as expected, Katz predicted the pace of the department's retirements will slow to an average of 1.5 per month.

Jackson, who serves as a field training officer in addition to his patrol duties, said he "almost definitely" will stay on past his 50th birthday to take advantage of the salary increase and its impact on his retirement.

Because the Virginia Retirement System calculates benefits based on a retiree's highest salary over the final 36 months of full-time employment, Jackson plans to continue working full-time until July 2022. His salary is projected to jump by about 11 percent over that period.

"I think [the retention incentive] will keep a lot of people from retiring," he said.

Asked if he thinks the department's command staff will emphasize the need for the longest-serving employees to work closely with young officers and share their wealth of experience before they retire, Jackson said he doesn't think anything will change in that regard.

"It happens organically now," he added, "and it will continue." ■

# Given a chance

## Cadet program builds confidence in young adults with disabilities

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

**O**n a frigid early December morning, Travis Akins stood at the front of a conference room in the county's Juvenile and Domestic Relations Courthouse and took a deep breath, preparing to tell a group of parents something they might not be ready to hear.

"We're not going to baby your sons," said Akins, a Chesterfield native and founder of Growth Through Opportunity, a 16-week program that provides young adults who have a variety of physical and/or intellectual disabilities with hands-on learning experiences, skill- and confidence-building and socialization through training alongside local first responders.

"You have to turn the reins loose, parents," he said, his voice rising as he gestured toward five young men sitting in the first row of chairs at the program's Chesterfield kickoff.

"They're never going to flourish, they're never going to learn, they're never going to build themselves up if we keep babying them. The sky is the limit if we give them an opportunity."

Nearly four months later, standing outside the county's public meeting room following the March 22 graduation of the first class of GTO cadets in the Richmond region, Akins shook his head and chuckled as he recalled the anxious, uncertain looks on the faces of their parents.

"I'll tell you, some of them were not ecstatic with me at all," he said. "They're thinking, 'Oh my God, my kid has Asperger's, my kid has autism, my kid has an intellectual disability.' But we show them. We do it with a lot of love and care and it works."

Four of the five cadets – Chesterfield residents Conor "C.J." Gallagher, Brandon Garcia, Christopher Brennan and Conner Ackerman – participated in the graduation ceremony last month. A fifth, Dakaree Mitchell, was unable to attend because he had landed a job since completing the GTO curriculum and was at work.



ASH DANIEL

"That's the goal for this program," said Chesterfield Sheriff Karl Leonard, who pitched it to leaders of the county's other public safety agencies last year after hearing Akins speak about it at a sheriffs conference in Norfolk. "It's already making inroads and helping people, which is great."

Akins launched Growth Through Opportunity in November 2014 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Two years later, he walked away from a 23-year career in law enforcement in Roanoke, taking early retirement to focus on running the program full time.

It has since been established in 30 localities across Virginia and Minnesota. Akins hopes to eventually take it nationwide.

Akins' son was born with agenesis of the corpus callosum, a rare neurological disorder in which the band of white matter that connects the two hemispheres of the brain fails to develop normally, causing both cognitive difficulties and social impairment.

Having taught autism awareness courses at the Roanoke police academy, Akins thought it would be more effective to take a hands-on approach and make public safety agencies accessible to young men and women with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and other physical and intellectual disabilities.

While the program provides opportunities for people with special needs to build self-confidence, learn to work as part of a team and acquire valuable job skills, it's also meant to be educational for first-responders; they get to experience working with people who have intellectual disabilities in the hope that it promotes mutual understanding and reduces anxiety should they encounter each other in an emergency situation.

"I was briefed prior to the class about how functional they are, what to expect, and that prepared me about how I should

respond to them," said Mark Vanderwerker, a Chesterfield sheriff's deputy who taught a CPR course for the GTO cadets in January.

"The biggest thing I've learned is don't stop what [the cadets are] doing; learn from it. You just go with the flow. If they do something wrong, politely correct them and show them the right way to do it. Let them do it. Don't let it get to you if they say something that's not appropriate."

Akins acknowledges the program was "completely unheard of" when he initially pitched it to his superiors in Roanoke.

"It met with a lot of resistance – it took us a year to get the program up and running," he added. "When we wanted to place uniforms on the cadets, that was taboo as well. But the uniform is a great way to teach cultural assimilation and mutual respect. It very quickly elevates their confidence level."

It didn't take long for the program to get onto the radar of some of the nation's most influential political and educational leaders.

In 2017, GTO was recognized on Capitol Hill as the Champion of Change Organization of the Year. It also received an Innovations and Bright Ideas Award from the Kennedy School of Business at Harvard University. It is now endorsed by the National Sheriffs Association and National Down Syndrome Society.

When Leonard heard Akins' presentation last summer, he immediately thought GTO was a "no brainer" for Chesterfield. Police Chief Jeffrey Katz and Fire/EMS Chief Loy Senter agreed. The three public safety leaders directed their respective staffs to give Akins whatever logistical support he needed.

"Two of our priorities are creating partnerships with the community and protecting the vulnerable. What better way

to protect the vulnerable in our community than to give them opportunities to succeed in life?" said Lt. Col. Dan Kelly, a deputy chief with the Chesterfield Police Department.

Over 16 weeks, the GTO cadets participated in a variety of hands-on learning experiences with mentors from county departments including the Sheriff's Office, Fire and EMS, the Police Department and General Services, which partnered with vocational counselors from the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services.

The cadets helped repair damaged gear, washed fire engines and cooked meals for the firefighters at Swift

Creek Station 16. They learned CPR at the county's Eanes-Pittman Training Center and volunteered with the Christmas Mother program. They also engaged in daily workouts and self-defense training with Chesterfield first responders.

"My brother cadets and I always wore this uniform with honor and respect because we knew we were part of something special and unique," said Gallagher, who spoke for his graduating class at last month's ceremony. "I wouldn't trade anything for the opportunity I was given. It has changed my life for the better."

"I think we're all better people today because of this program," Leonard added. "This is something we're going to continue."

As Akins tried to exit the public meeting room through a side door following the ceremony, he came face to face with Connor Ackerman's mom, Kim, who hugged him and thanked him profusely for helping her son.

Connor celebrated his 24th birthday on March 22. A couple weeks earlier, he had passed his road test and obtained a driver's license from the Department of Motor Vehicles.

"People don't realize, being able to drive yourself places is a big part of adulthood and being able to gain independence, and being able to have a job without worrying about calling up a transportation provider and waiting hours for a ride," Kim Ackerman said.

Asked what it was like to be able to get behind the wheel and drive without his mom riding shotgun, Connor didn't miss a beat.

"It's quiet," he said with a smile. ■

	<p><b>WEDNESDAY</b> <b>COUNTRY NIGHT</b> starts 7pm - 21+ <b>BIG 98.5</b> RICHMOND'S #1 COUNTRY</p> <p><b>THURSDAY</b> <b>KARAOKE @8PM</b></p>	<p><b>FRIDAY</b> <b>PATIO</b> P-A-R-T-Y 6-9pm April 12 <b>DAMIAN ALLEN</b></p>	<p><b>FRIDAY</b> <b>APRIL 12</b></p> <p><b>THE HERE AND NOW</b></p>	<p><b>SATURDAY</b> <b>APRIL 13</b></p> <p>9pm 21+ \$5 cover starts at 8pm</p> <p><b>CEDAR CREEK</b></p>
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