

Police department handing out official trading cards

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GLOUCESTER, Mass. (AP) — Many were “requesting the girl card.” The “girl” in question is Gloucester Police Officer Heidi Fialho, who like several of her colleagues, had schoolchildren running up to her to ask for her personal trading cards during all three lunch periods in the Plum Cove School cafeteria on Thursday.

The Gloucester force has adopted officer trading cards, joining Essex and other departments across the country in an effort to reach out to community children, and it used drug seizure money to pay for them. The cards are being combined with the Kops ‘n’ Kids program, in which officers visit the city’s elementary schools every year, serve the meals and sit with the children while they eat.

“They get to know that the police are their friends, they’re regular people, they’re here to support them and have fun with them and there’s nothing to be afraid of,” Principal Tammy Morgan said.

The first six students who collect a complete set of cards will win a ride to school in a police cruiser, with parental permission.

Plum Cove is the second school whose students have received the trading cards; officers were at East Gloucester Elementary School a couple of weeks ago. Cards were made for the 14 officers who most often visit the schools.

The trading cards feature a photo of the police officer, their name and a brief description of their career, personal hobbies and a message. Take Officer Scott Duffany’s card, a city cop since 1988, known as “The General” for his pro wrestling, and his quote: “Always remember if you break the law, you can’t bluff the Duff, I’m coming for you.”

Fialho was at Plum Cove explaining the trading cards to a group of children, and got many requests for her own.

Fialho is one of the two female officers on the Gloucester force. “We try to come to every one to encourage the girls that, ‘You can be a police officer, too.’ A lot of them say, ‘I would try it when I grow up,’” Fialho said, laughing.

In a profession largely dominated by men, Fialho said she hasn't had issues with her male coworkers in her five years in the position. "Sometimes the community is a little different to receive us, but we try and squash it pretty quickly and move on from that," she said. "So far it hasn't been a prominent issue."

Women make up just 13 percent of the nation's police forces, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. For young girls seeking a career in law enforcement, Fialho has a piece of advice.

"Don't get discouraged because you are a girl," she said. "We can do anything that the boys can do, and you might even do it better."

During her junior year of college, Fialho decided to change course from studying juvenile probation to become a full-time officer after taking part in the citizens police academy in Gloucester.

"It was meeting the actual officers and hearing the stories and what they actually do on a daily basis because you don't ever really know that unless you know one of us," she said. "There are other things you do besides arresting people and stopping cars."

In her mind, that experience in the academy solidified her belief in the significance of community engagement.

"I think especially this interaction — being at the schools — is important because they see us in a positive aspect," she said. "They see us in a positive note rather than a negative one and that I think is important to kids at a young age."

Chief John McCarthy had the idea to make trading cards during a Kops 'n' Kids event at West Parish School last year.

"All the kids wanted autographs but the only thing we had to give them autographs on were the napkins in the dispenser," McCarthy said. "Now the kids love it."

Children will have an opportunity to collect more cards at a Kops 'n' Kids Hayride during the Middle Street Walk on Saturday. The hay wagon will be in front of the steps of City Hall, 9 Dale Ave., from 10 a.m. to noon.

"We want this to be fun time. We want them to know us in a good circumstance," McCarthy said. "Everybody's first interaction with the police usually is something negative. We hear what's going on all around the country about the negativity with police interaction with people, we want to start them out saying, 'We like the police. This is where we go if we need help.'"

