

# MAKING IT BETTER



By Chief Erik Upson, Benicia Police Department

In these challenging times reconnecting with our communities must be law enforcement agencies' top priority. Unfortunately, our youth are growing up surrounded by negative messages about law enforcement – messages reinforcing stereotypes that put the future of our communities' safety at risk. We tend to spend a great deal of time trying to connect with adults and teenagers, but perhaps make some assumptions about our younger community members. Unfortunately, this is the group most susceptible to the negative messages repeatedly projected by mass media; the group least in position to defend themselves from a clear and sustained attempt to drive a wedge between us. In the summer of 2016, I had the good fortune to meet a remarkable individual who has dedicated himself to finding ways to help connect law enforcement with the community, especially our most vulnerable population. His name is Andre Lewis.

The amount of positivity that radiates from Andre is difficult to convey in writing. He has an exceptional resume including graduating from the U.S. Air Force Academy, flying as a pilot for FedEx and creating his own literary company. However, his greatest achievement can be seen in the three amazing daughters he has raised who are leaders in their own right. Andre has dedicated himself to a very unique format for connecting police with youth through children's literature. Andre, a Benicia resident, approached me with an idea for a children's picture



book that would help reinforce positive messages about developing character and responsibility, recognizing that police officers are there for them and are always available in times of need, and improving literacy among our low-income families.

The book, titled *Making It Better in Our Community*, takes kids through a positive story of a boy rising above peer pressure to do the right thing while connecting with a local officer who helps guide him on a path to self-awareness, self-confidence, and ultimately learning to stand on his own. The book is generally targeted toward second through fourth graders.

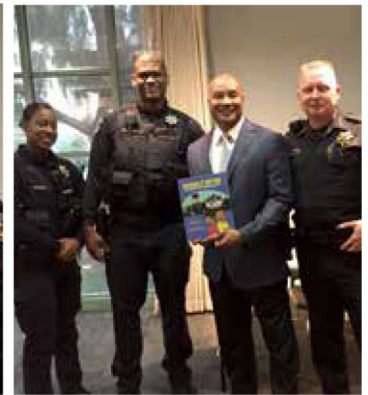
Perhaps as important as the book is the method of delivery. The books are issued to officers and placed in every one of our patrol cars. Additionally, there is a stack of books available at the station. We kicked off our partnership with Andre and his book with a reading at the Benicia Public Library, conducted by myself and my two School Resource Officers. The idea is that every kid who is read the book by an officer gets to keep a copy of the book,



autographed by that officer with a personal message and a phone number they can reach that officer through. If an officer doesn't feel comfortable putting their own number, they can put down the dispatch number (dispatchers are aware that they might get calls and how to address those calls). Additionally, we are in the process of providing the library with ten copies of the book that will be prominently displayed and can be checked out by community youth.

Because the book is hardcover and signed by the officer, it is Andre's hope that the book isn't just a book to the young child, but rather a "treasure," something they will put out on display in their rooms and will serve as a constant reminder of the valuable lessons contained within. While this is just one example of what my officers do in the community to foster good relationships, it is another step of a journey of a thousand steps. That being said, it is an important step: attempting to connect with perhaps the most vulnerable and defenseless populations in our community. Though it may seem like a simple act, it's not one that should be dismissed, as a healthy relationship between a law enforcement agency and the youth in the community it serves is priceless. We must help them understand that the police are to be trusted, and that without them and our partnership, our communities are less safe.

If anyone is interested in partnering with Andre, he can be reached at [alewis@literarytools.org](mailto:alewis@literarytools.org) or you can reach out to me at [eupson@ci.benicia.ca.us](mailto:eupson@ci.benicia.ca.us). ■



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