

Building Young Leaders, Strengthening Communities

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SA Justin Downen (2nd row, far right) worked with Green Beret Project youth at the FBI Academy.

The model U.S. Special Forces personnel use to identify and cultivate leaders in warzones like Iraq can work at home, too. That's the philosophy behind the Green Beret Project and its community service in Delaware and other areas.

The nonprofit organization seeks to create positive opportunities for underprivileged youths by teaching them how to be physically fit, mentally tough and community oriented. Through the project, young people learn values such as loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage.

SA Justin Downen of the [Baltimore Division's](#) Dover RA served with the elite U.S. Army unit in the early 2000s in Iraq and has firsthand experience with developing leaders and building relationships. He's volunteered with the Green Beret Project since 2016 and serves as a mentor and coach to kids in the program, who range in age from 8 to 21.

"There are kids in our group who have siblings who are incarcerated or dead, parents who are incarcerated or dead," Downen said. "It's mostly kids growing up in government housing who participate in our program, and many of them have very challenging lives. However, they are great to work with and give me confidence that this program is scalable and has the potential to reduce crime, improve community relations, save the government money and produce the skilled workers our country needs."

While serving as a class counselor at Quantico, Downen connected with [Training Division](#) DAD Renae McDermott, and they discussed the school-to-prison pipeline that can disproportionately affect young people from disadvantaged backgrounds across the country.



The Green Beret Project members enjoyed a tour of the Academy.

Connecting with kids — mentoring and showing them alternative paths to realize their potential — is one way to disrupt that pipeline. McDermott knew of Downen's involvement with the Green Beret Project and invited him to bring some colleagues and young people to tour the FBI Academy.

The Green Beret Project offers informal and formal mentoring and programs after school and on weekends. Participants have done service projects like fixing up an abandoned home in Dover for the community's use.

Through a partnership with a local gym in Dover, Green Beret Project youth and adult volunteers do crossfit-style workouts together to improve their health and form bonds through hard work and sweat.

As young people spend time in the Green Beret Project program and mature, it's hoped they remain involved and become leaders themselves.

"You're standing where those kids are, where they are now, having been a product of growing up in the inner city, you can understand the challenges," said Mark Eubanks, Green Beret Project president. The retired Army sergeant major was Downen's "best boss" in the Green Berets and grew up in the St. Louis area.

"Sometimes it's just about providing the opportunity and giving them a chance," Eubanks said. "Because sometimes, if the only options in front of you are bad, then you're only going to make bad choices."

Cultivating Leaders

Among the project's young leaders is Derick Charles, a 22-year-old rising senior at Wesley College in Dover. The son of Haitian immigrants, Charles is one of nine children and was raised in Florida. He studies exercise science and kinesiology and plays basketball at the Division III school.



"I want to see what it takes to become an FBI agent," said Derick Charles, a student at Wesley College in Delaware.

He learned the game starting in eighth grade, and he worked hard to improve. The 6'6, 190-pound forward loves to win. But Charles's coach also emphasized community involvement, and Charles met Downen when the agent spoke at a school assembly in Dover. He's volunteered with the project for several years and has seen younger kids benefit from it.

Charles also knows firsthand what life is like in Haiti from family visits; he's grateful to be an American citizen. As he reminds the project's younger participants, "There's a kid out there in Haiti, Africa, India, in impoverished conditions, who would trade your life right now in a heartbeat," he said.

With Downen's guidance and encouragement, Charles plans to enlist in the Delaware National Guard and use his service to help pay for his education and, perhaps in the future, help Charles one day work for the Bureau.

When Downen first suggested to Charles that he consider becoming an agent, "I thought he was joking," Charles said. "But I was thinking about it the past couple of months: Can I really do this? Yeah, let's go for it. I want to see what it takes to become an FBI agent."

In Charles, Downen sees a young man with grit, compassion and a top-notch work ethic.

The Green Beret Project has partnerships with the Dover Housing Authority — it uses a former community center as its command post — and the state's Department of Correction.

Downen would like to see the Green Beret Project expand beyond Dover and Wilmington. In recognition of his volunteerism with the project, Downen will receive a Director's Award and the William H. Webster Award from the Society of Former Special Agents this fall.

In Georgia

The Green Beret Project has a presence in Savannah, Georgia, but it's on a smaller scale.

In 2016, Savannah had 55 homicides, and most of the gun violence was perpetrated by people younger than 18.

SSRA Phil Wislar of the Savannah RA, [Atlanta Division](#), learned about the Green Beret Project from a colleague in the Criminal Investigative Division's Violent Crimes Unit who suggested he talk with Downen because both were pursuing similar approaches to help young people in high-risk environments.

"A lot of at-risk kids, once they find out you are law enforcement, just shut down," Wislar said. "So the other part was building an avenue to connect with them in a way that would give them access to a new platform of mentoring that they weren't getting access to in the home, schools or churches."

He found an opportunity through the Moses Jackson Community Center, and he went to meetings and got to know the staff. Those relationships lead him to the Savannah Urban Mentoring Academy, and a man named Trey Singleton, who mentors seventh- through 11th-grade boys.

Wislar and his RA colleagues created a 16-week law and leadership class about the Bureau's legal framework, mission and programs, and they did it in a relatable way.

The class was centered on the foundation of individual and collective leadership responsibilities as members of a community. It was about addressing life challenges, decision making and helping others in need.

It also included an integrated case, complete with a crime scene, complainant calls and in-person interviews to model how to have a conversation, build trust and rapport in a way "that allows someone to open up about topics that they would otherwise be very uncomfortable sharing," Wislar said. "Reliance on technology as a primary means of communication has made it very challenging for children to cultivate those skills."

Wislar next approached Building Bridges Academy, an alternative middle and high school, about integrating the Green Beret Project framework as part of its program. He and a victim specialist and two special agents spend time with students there on a weekly basis, and they take part in facilitated group discussions and work out with the kids.

For Wislar, the Green Beret Project is a community program that provides a scalable framework that he can customize to meet the unique needs of his AOR.

"We all have a responsibility, and no one organization can do it alone," he said. We all have to be in this together to reach to these kids, to demonstrate that we are invested in them, not for one event, but for life."

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