

Community Policing Deputies Have High Point *Playing A Different Tune*

When the Musical Strings Alternatives YMCA program started, the group had one instructor, most student members had never laid a hand on an instrument, and the only violins on which they had to learn were made of cardboard. Sadly, none of these were its biggest obstacle.

The group calls "home" the YMCA of the Suncoast in the High Point area. Musical Strings Alternatives Maestro and former Florida Orchestra First Chair Violinist Eden Vaning said that despite the growing interest in the program, organizers didn't feel safe hosting practices at the YMCA, storing expensive instruments there, or travelling throughout the community to perform at events in the crime-ridden area.

Thanks to Pinellas County Sheriff's Office Community Policing deputies, that has changed.

Throughout the past 16 years since the musical program originated, Community Policing deputies have made huge strides in improving safety in the High Point community, and the musical group has made parallel advancements.

The program has grown and developed, providing local youth a much-needed creative musical outlet that has kept them off the streets and resulted in several full

college scholarships. After ditching the cardboard for violins of authentic wood and strings, the unique program is now taught by former students who volunteer to teach their peers using a very simple curriculum that allows anyone to play the violin, viola, or cello.

"We couldn't feel safe having the program if it weren't for you," Vaning said at a Community Policing Appreciation Luncheon at which the Musical Strings Alternatives were the main entertainment. "None of this would be possible without the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office deputies."

Musical Strings Alternatives played several patriotic songs with American flags waving. The musicians and YMCA summer camp participants then presented deputies with a HEROES art piece for their commitment and dedication to making the High Point community a safer place to live.

After **Deputy Gary Wilson, Jr.**, was called to the front for a lesson on how to complete a formal performance bow from one of the students, he and **Deputy Tony Jurado, Jr.**, each received a plaque in special recognition for their ceaseless dedication to keeping safe and building relationships within the High Point community.

"With everything that you hear going on with law enforcement today, we want to shine a light on the good that our sheriff's department does every day," YMCA of the Suncoast Executive **Director George Garcia** said at the event. "They're our heroes."

