

Niles Herald-Spectator

Updated 8/6: National Night Out brings cops, public together

(<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/niles/news/1093905,ni-natnight-080608-s1.article>)

August 6, 2008

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At Tuesday night's 25th Annual National Night Out, Niles residents gathered outside St. John Brebeuf Church to discuss crime prevention with police officers -- as well as challenge them to a doughnut eating contest and dunk them in a tank of water.

Niles Police Chief Dean Strzelecki said he appreciated the chance to have a little fun with his neighbors.

"It's great to be out here with the public," he said. "We need the people. Our jobs would be very difficult without them."

The National Night Out program began as an effort to build relationships between communities and their police departments to prevent crime.

"The plan behind this was to get the community involved with the police," Strzelecki said. "It's about awareness."

The night's festivities featured the usual face painting and balloon twisting for kids, but some activities, like the "Fatal Vision" DUI Simulation, were for adults and teens.

In the simulation, motorists drove a golf cart around a short, orange cone obstacle course while wearing special "Fatal Vision" goggles to replicate visual impairment from intoxication.

More than a few drivers cringed at the course of flattened cones they left in their "drunken" wake.

Sgt. Robert Tornabene described activities that were less serious like the "Dunk-a-Cop" station and the inflatable pony races.

"We are also having the 'ProAm Doughnut Eating Contest,'" he said. "The pros being the cops and the amateurs being the general public."

The Niles Teen Center also organized some video game activities inside the parish ministry center including "Guitar Hero" and "Dance Dance Revolution."

"The goal of the teen center since its inception has partly been to help keep kids out of trouble," said Mark Williams, the teen center director. "We want to give them a safe, supervised environment."

Williams said a good way to prevent teen crime was for parents to be more involved in the lives of their children.

"You've got to know where your kids are, who they are with, and what they are doing," he said. "That's tough because teens want you to ignore them. But to be a good parent, you've got to get involved with your kids."

The evening culminated with residents joining police officers on a 1-mile "flashlight walk" through the neighborhood.

Tornabene said the event was meant to symbolize the cooperation between the community and the police department.

"The community walks as one and we shine a light on crime," he said. "We are saying that we don't want crime here."