

Citizen's Police Academy gives residents glimpse into law enforcement

By ALI ROCKETT Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Thursday, November 24, 2016 10:30 pm

After Svondai Brown lost her godson on Christmas Eve last year, she thought she'd like to become a police officer.

She already had an impressive résumé of philanthropy from volunteering with Project:HOMES, a group that helps elderly Richmond residents with making their homes more accessible, to hosting an annual Easter event in the city. But the loss caused her to see what more she could do in the community.

"That was a rip out of the center of my heart," Brown said.

Traquan Holmes, 18, had graduated from Armstrong High School that May before he was fatally shot Christmas Eve 2015 in the Creighton Court public housing complex. He'd hoped to join the Air Force.

"Once he was taken away, I knew I needed to be out on the street," Brown said. "I needed to do more. More needed to change. There are so many killings that it's unexplainable."

In September, Brown enrolled in the Richmond Police Department's Citizens Police Academy hoping for a glimpse of what she might experience as an officer.

"I thought that me going through the Citizens Academy would open my mind and see how Richmond does things," she said. "If I hadn't have been in the Citizens Academy, I would have still really been on the fence about joining the police department."

Brown said that academy showed the wide breadth of issues law enforcement officers have to deal with — it's not just crime-solving.

The academy is held biannually with more than 600 graduates citywide. The course, typically about a month long, covers topics from departmental structure to crime scene forensic investigation techniques. Participants tour not only police facilities like a precinct building, but also outside agencies like the Richmond Ambulance Authority and Division of Emergency Communications, which play important roles in policing our city as well.

One of the eye openers for Brown was the crisis intervention training police go through to deal with individuals with mental health or drug abuse issues. Issues, Brown said, that could be handled by other departments but have fallen onto police as part of their job to respond to emergency calls.



Citizens Academy

Rob Lawrence of the Richmond Ambulance Authority taught a CPR class for the 22nd Citizens Police Academy. Rob Lawrence of the Richmond Ambulance Authority taught a CPR class for the 22nd Citizens Police Academy.

“I would encourage anyone who has the extra time, and can be dedicated to those couple of weeks, to go ahead and take it,” Brown said.

Brown graduated with about 33 others from the 22nd academy class in October. Earlier this month, she took a physical assessment test required for entry into the actual police academy, the one that trains recruit to become officers. She didn't pass, but she's not giving up.

“I'm a people's person,” Brown said. “The uniform won't make me. The paycheck won't make me stop caring for people.”

From retirees who find they have more time on their hands to students at Virginia Commonwealth University looking for career options, the academy offers those who live and work in the city a behind-the-scenes look at law enforcement.

Jaren Butts, a junior at VCU, hopes to be an FBI agent. The bureau often recruits from local police departments, so that's where she'll be looking for a job come graduation.

Butts enjoyed the academy's hands-on approach, and said it seemed emblematic of how the department generally approaches policing referencing its focus on community police.

“It's not numbers-driven policing,” Butts said after the 22nd class's graduation last month. “But community-driven.”