

New Bedford students graduate from True Course program

Getting higher grades. Handling anger better. Behaving more appropriately and cutting down on discipline incidents.

These are the kinds of goals set and, more importantly, accomplished by the five New Bedford students who graduated from the Bristol County Sheriff's Office True Course program last week.

Parents, guardians, case workers and staff applauded as the five students – Devin, Nellyanne, Karina, Franchesca and Luis – received their certificates for completing the program over the last 11 months at a ceremony held at the Sheriff's Office.

Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson urged the graduates to go back to their neighborhoods, communities and schools and pass along the lessons learned to others.

"Help each other out," he said to the graduates. "Become young leaders, go back to your communities and make them stronger."

Created last year to support at-risk youth before they get into trouble, the True Course program uses the outdoors as a vehicle for change to boost life skills, teamwork and self-confidence in kids who are at risk to head down the wrong path. Youth are referred to the True Course program from the United Way's Family Resource Development Center, which typically receives referrals from school resource officers, guidance counselors or family members.

"This is all about community," Sheriff Hodgson continued. "Parents, guardians, the United Way, everyone coming together to get kids on the right trajectory."

Youth in the program undertake a variety of outdoor activities

and adventures, such as canoeing, ziplining, fishing, camping and others. Each activity has a life skill and team work component built into it. For example, youth went canoeing, capsized their canoes and had to work as a team and communicate effectively to get back in. Another example is using map and compass to navigate in the outdoors, with True Course staff sharing with the youth that they need to have their own life map and moral compasses to being a happy, healthy adult and member of the community.

The best part of the program? It's working. A staff member from the United Way FRDC said at the graduation ceremony that Nellyanne, one of her students, is now a straight-A scholar. Parents attending said their children are behaving better than they were.

The next step for two of the graduates is a 12-week leadership course, upon which after completion, they will serve as peer leaders to future True Course youth.

"The best way to make a real impact on public safety is to reach children before they ever walk through the front door of a police station or jail," Sheriff Hodgson said. "Programs like this and others are critically important to building strong communities, neighborhoods and schools."

True Course was named after the maritime term for a vessel's first charted course before weather and other factors push it off course. It is staffed by Youth Outreach Deputies Mike Valler, Bruno Ventura, Mariah Carvalho and Tyler Oliveira. Parents or others interested in the program should contact the United Way's FRDC in New Bedford at 508-994-4521. The program is slated to expand to Fall River later this year.