

Three graduate from Bristol County Sheriff's Office "True Course" program that uses the outdoors as a vehicle for change in at-risk youth

It was a steamy day in the middle of August. Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson was in a canoe on a small lake in Canton, Massachusetts.

In an instant, he capsized, flipping over and dunking into the water.

A group of children in other canoes laughed and smiled as Sheriff Hodgson reached for his paddle in the water. The kids then helped him empty his canoe, get it upright and climb back in.

They worked together to get the Sheriff back in the canoe, and that was the whole point of the trip.

"When I got there, I saw a bunch of great kids who enjoyed being outdoors in nature," Sheriff Hodgson said Tuesday. "School is important, we all know that, but these kids were learning lessons being in nature, and that's important too."



Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson and Youth Outreach Deputies Mike Valler, Bruno Ventura, Mariah Carvalho and Tyler Oliveira celebrate with True Course graduate Aden Medeiros in Dartmouth recently. [Photo courtesy of the Bristol County Sheriff's Office]

The kids were part of the Bristol County Sheriff's Office True Course program, which uses the outdoors as a vehicle for change in at-risk youth. Youth Outreach Deputies Mike Valler, Bruno Ventura, Mariah Carvalho and Tyler Oliveira use outdoor activities to instill confidence, leadership and teamwork in kids.

For example, kids may get a classroom lesson in reading a map and following a compass, then head outdoors for a real-world application. The canoeing lessons started inside in a classroom and eventually turned into an all-out overnight camping trip with canoeing and more activities.

Youth are referred to True Course through the Family Resource Centers in New Bedford and Fall River, which receives referrals from school faculty and staff, including guidance

counselors and resource officers.

Three New Bedford students – Aden Medeiros, Joshua Burgo and Matthew Burgo – graduated from the year-long program on Tuesday morning after a brief ceremony at the Dartmouth correctional complex. Joined by parents and other kids in the program who recently finished the summer portion, the kids enjoyed some Cornhole, Kan Jam, refreshments and a K9 demonstration.

Youth who graduate from the program have an opportunity to come back as peer leaders, something the Sheriff's Office is hoping the three recent graduates will do.



Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson and Youth Outreach Deputies Bruno Ventura, Mariah Carvalho and Tyler Oliveira celebrate with True Course graduate Joshua Burgo in Dartmouth recently. [Photo courtesy of the Bristol County Sheriff's Office]

"We will always be there for you," Sheriff Hodgson told the crowd of kids and parents. "This program is really a point of

pride for the entire department. We think it should be modeled across the country.”

Grants and donations have allowed the True Course program to expand its offerings in the fall and next year. Deputies recently acquired mountain bikes and archery sets. This winter, kids will also build and fly drones.

Deputy Oliveira also celebrated his last days with the True Course program as he is moving on to become a police officer with the New Bedford Police Department. Damen Desmarais will be joining the True Course team starting in September.

For more information about the True Course program, contact Deputies Valler, Ventura or Carvalho at MichaelValler@bcso-ma.org, BrunoVentura@bcso-ma.org or MariahCarvalho@bcso-ma.org.