

Badge of honor: Former GANG campers aim to be first women in Worcester police unit

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WORCESTER - Some of the kids that Tiana Felix grew up with on the streets of this city are in prison. Others are dead.

Ms. Felix could have gone in that direction, too, she said. But starting with the summer when she was 8 years old, she and friends from the Boys & Girls Club took part in the GANG Camp summer program run for at-risk children by the Worcester Police Department's gang unit.

Now, at 21, Ms. Felix hopes to join the department and become the first African-American woman officer on the gang unit.

"My goal is to teach the youth to understand that not every police officer is bad," Ms. Felix said Tuesday as she shepherded this summer's GANG campers during a free skating session at the Worcester Ice Center.

Ms. Felix is a mentor at the 16th annual Gang Awareness for the Next Generation Camp. A graduate of Worcester Technical High School and Quinsigamond Community College, she is studying criminal justice at Worcester State University. She aspires to enter the police academy in October.

So does another mentor at this summer's GANG Camp - Stephanie Leveillee, 24, of Worcester, who was also inspired to become a police officer by her experience at the summer program.

Ms. Leveillee and Ms. Felix, if they achieve their goals, would be the first women on the gang unit.

“They changed my life,” said Ms. Leveillee. “At the young age of 10 they influenced me so much that I knew what I wanted to do. They made me believe (that) whatever I wanted to do and I could set my mind to, I could do.”

Ms. Leveillee, who grew up on Englewood Avenue, is the daughter of Julie Leveillee of Worcester and Brian Leveillee of Quincy. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she said she benefited greatly from the time she spent at the Boys & Girls Club and GANG Camp.

She played basketball at Quinsigamond Community College and then at Fitchburg State, where she majored in criminal justice.

“I think I can communicate to children in a different way,” she said. “I’m able to converse at their level because I’ve been through it. That’s the way I look at it.”

Ms. Felix grew up on Southbridge Street, one of a set of triplets, in the middle of her father’s nine children. Her parents divorced when she was in fifth grade. “I was in the streets, had a lot of negatives,” she said. “I had to figure it out on my own. I had to grow up at a very young age.”

She said she wants to bring kids a positive message: “It doesn’t matter where you grow up. That doesn’t determine your future. Your neighborhood has nothing to do with your future. If you decide not to stay in school, if you decide not to do your homework and pay attention, then yes, you’ll follow the statistics. However, if you put your nose in the books, if you focus on what you need to do, focus on the goal, then you’ll strive for excellence and become something more than what you thought you could ever accomplish.”

She said her parents, Diana Allen and Withfield Felix of Worcester, are supportive. Her mother “says she always knew I was going to become something later in life,” Ms. Felix said. Of her father, she said: “All he does is brag about me. He’s been a strong motivation.”

If she does become a police officer, Ms. Felix said, she anticipates encountering old friends from the neighborhood in the line of duty. “I think about that all the time,” she said. “You’re a Worcester kid; you grew up here. There’s going to be people you came across, shared words with, that you’re going to have to arrest. You have to be prepared for that.”

Becoming a police officer is “something I’ve wanted to do for a very long time,” she said.

Both women cited Officer Thomas Duffy of the gang unit as a mentor who has made a difference in their lives.

Officer Duffy, 44, a 20-year veteran of the force, said Tuesday: “I’ve known them since they were little girls, coming to this camp. They’re from our city; I’m from our city. To see them grow up and want to be part of a unit that we’re a part of means a lot to me.”