

OUR STORIES

Officer Zach Hastings



Dayton police officer Zach Hasting sits down to lunch with Belmont High School students (from left) Seth Burdette, Kenyon Evans and Billy Veal (Photo/Jennifer Bryant)

Our daily encounters shape us as individuals. Dayton police officer Zach Hastings' philosophy is to take a troubling encounter and turn it into something good. That mindset is molding students' lives at [Belmont High School](#), where you can find Officer Hastings every week having lunch with them.

Hastings is a crime prevention officer with the Dayton Police Department in the East Patrol Operations Division. Among his many duties is community outreach, including heading up the "Coffee with a Cop" program in which officers visit with residents in a casual setting to share ideas. Belmont's assistant principal, Daniel Hinshaw, was at one of those events and invited Hastings to the school for lunch. He jumped at the chance.

His desire to meet the students stems from chance encounters with them while on the beat. Not one to let any encounter leave a negative impression, he was energized to get involved in the students' lives.

"The first few times I came to the school, students asked me whether I was here for somebody or asked what I was doing there," Officer Hastings said.

Slowly, with every visit, the students started to respond. Positive relationships were formed through good conversation and laughter. He believes young people will be more accepting of the laws he enforces when they see him on their level. He hopes they will be less reluctant to approach a uniformed police officer on patrol.

"Students can ask me whatever is on their minds. It really breaks down barriers," Hastings said.

One student shared his desire to become a firefighter during a lunchroom conversation with Hastings, who just happens to be a reserve firefighter for the Air Force. Hastings took it upon himself to guide the senior through the application process to become a Dayton firefighter.

It is not unusual for Hastings to spot a teenager in the vast lunchroom that he's dealt with on patrol. Two students in particular left an impression on him.

"I'm glad to see them doing well. They recognized me, so it's satisfying to follow up with these kids that have crossed my path in the community."

Crime prevention policing techniques are a high priority of the Dayton Police Department. A department spokesperson says crime prevention officers have three primary responsibilities:

- Establish programs that encourage the public to take an active role in preventing crime
- Educate the community in crime prevention techniques
- Liaison with interested community groups

Ask Belmont Principal Melanie Walter whether Hastings is fulfilling his duties and you will hear a resounding affirmation.

"Having Officer Hastings come into the school makes such a positive impact at Belmont. Whether during weekly lunchtime visits, walking through the hallways, shooting baskets with the teams, or attending extracurricular events, he is building bonds with the students, breaking down barriers and fostering strong relationships that promote a sense of community. Now, when they see him come in, the students no longer identify him with a negative or dangerous situation; rather, they see him as a police officer who has their best interests as his top priority," Principal Walter said.

Hastings grew up in Harrison Township and attended Northridge High School. He says he worked several jobs over the years, but it was his stint in the Air Force that helped him set a course in life. He became a police officer at the age of 31. He is in his eighth year with the Dayton Police Department.



Dayton police officer Zach Hastings sits down to lunch with Belmont High School student Corey Lockhart. (Above photo/Jennifer Bryant)