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## Citizen Police Academy gets people involved with Springfield police

**By RHYS SAUNDERS (rhys.saunders@sj-r.com)****THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

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Gayland "Gene" Acree signed up for this year's Citizen Police Academy conducted by the Springfield Police Department so he could learn to confront troubling changes in his neighborhood.

The 10-week, every-Monday-evening academy, which is free, couples a classroom environment with hands-on demonstrations and learning experiences at the police station and officer-training academy.

Despite budget cuts that have affected other areas of law enforcement, the city's 14-year-old Citizen Police Academy continues. Police say it's an important crime-fighting tool and a way to get residents more involved and familiar with the department.

"I think it makes them a lot more aware of what we do and what we're looking for when we're investigating cases," Deputy Chief Cliff Buscher said.

Acree, 54, is one of a couple of dozen people who are attending the weekly classes offered by the city police department. Classes began Oct. 11, and graduation takes place Dec. 13.

He's lived in the Youngston Hills neighborhood, just north of Veterans Parkway off Jefferson Street, for 30 years. Until recently, it's always been a quiet area, Acree said.

"The activity has changed, there are different types of lifestyles," he said. "There have been more burglaries than we've ever had."

At the root of the problem are new neighbors, although Acree didn't want to identify them.

He plans to become Neighborhood Watch coordinator for his street, and the Citizen Police Academy is giving Acree a better understanding of policing and how to spot crimes.

"It answers a lot of questions that you have, and I've developed questions along the way," he said. "It gives you a better understanding of why things are the way they are."

### Citizen advocates

Springfield's Citizen Police Academy includes lectures about subjects such as officer-selection and training processes, uniformed officers' duties, tactical operations, investigation skills, narcotics, communications, crime-scene searches, crime prevention, ride-alongs, firearms demonstrations and the canine program.

It began in 1996 and has graduated about 450 civilians during that time, according to Cmdr. Mark Bridges.

For police, it's an opportunity for officers to introduce themselves to the community in a positive way, he said.

"The value that we see is an opportunity for us to introduce ourselves to the community, the key being that we all work together," said Bridges. "It's not an 'us-and-them' situation. It allows us to take down the barrier and show that we're not separate from the community."

Police say academy graduates are much more likely to talk to officers about community concerns after going through the program.

"When we run into CPA students, they know us, they talk to us, they chat us up at the store," Bridges said. "There's a recognition there."

### New partnership

New to the academy this year is a partnership with students from the University of Illinois Springfield. They make up 20 of the 32 current participants, according to Stephen Schnebly, a criminal justice professor at UIS. He and fellow professors Ryan Williams and Jay Gilliam talked with Police Chief Robert Williams about teaming up to provide student volunteers and a critique of the program.

"In the past, it had gone on without us knowing much about it," Schnebly said. "Quite frankly, I didn't expect a huge number of folks to volunteer. It was just an outpouring of interest."

Schnebly said the academy helps build relationships and trust between police and citizens, who often only know "what goes on in the black box of policing."

"Research has shown for decades that most crime doesn't get reported," he said. "In order for police to be productive in their jobs ... they need to work with the citizens they serve."

The three professors take turns observing the weekly sessions. They take notes and hope to provide critiques after the academy ends.

"We don't have any findings right now," Schnebly said. "In a couple months, once the program is wrapped up, I think we're going to have a pretty good understanding of what the strengths of the program are. One of our jobs is to sort of critique a little bit and give

feedback and talk about ways the program might more effectively achieve its goals.”

**Career decisions**

Attending this year’s academy has helped one of the UIS students decide what career to pursue after she graduates.

Jessica Flynn, originally from Alsip, is a legal-studies major and criminal-justice minor.

“I have always wanted to be a lawyer since I was a kid,” she said. “Taking this course has made me narrow down the options, and I am 99 percent sure I still want to be an attorney for children. I find the criminal justice department very interesting, but I do not feel like I would like to make a career out of it.”

Flynn said people who aren’t interested in a law enforcement career still can benefit from the academy.

“I would almost put money on it that their opinion would be changed, just because there is so much that the average citizen does not know about cops, their duties and all the training,” she said.

Fellow UIS students Jeremy Reynolds and Derek Mormino also are studying criminal justice and believe the academy has given them a better perspective about local policing.

Reynolds, originally from Chicago, said the citizens academy showed him many differences between Chicago and Springfield police.

“They do things differently in Springfield,” he said. “It’s a different perspective. They teach you what to observe, certain behaviors.”

Mormino, a criminal-justice major from Bethalto, said it also provides him a new way of looking at law enforcement issues. He is a cadet at Bethalto’s police academy and has worked on nuisance complaints.

“I would like to know how other departments do things,” he said.

Rhys Saunders can be reached at 788-1521.

**Budget problems closed county citizen police academy**

The Sangamon County Sheriff’s Office offered several community-outreach programs — including a citizen police academy — until budget constraints forced their hiatus about a year ago, according to Sheriff Neil Williamson.

The initiatives were valuable, he said.

“All of these things are temporarily on hold,” Williamson said. “We’re hoping to get them back.”

The sheriff’s citizen academy dated back 13 or 14 years, the sheriff said. His office also offered other programs, such as “Picnic with the Sheriff” and senior-outreach and burglary-prevention initiatives, that gave county citizens a voice in law enforcement. In turn, deputies were able to learn more about neighborhood problems in rural areas, Williamson said.

**Citizen Police Academy goals**

- \* Increase public awareness and confidence in law enforcement and the Springfield Police Department.
- \* Improve community relations and enhance the image of the Springfield Police Department.
- \* Enhance and augment the community policing concept.
- \* Improve community support and understanding of the role of the Springfield Police Department and that of the individual police officer.

Source: Springfield Police Department

**Want to join?**

For information and an application for the next Springfield Citizen Police Academy, call 788-8415.

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