

Submitted c 110M
11/9/98

#980785

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TO: Gainesville City Commission
FROM: Parents of children at Stephen Foster Elementary School
RE: Transfer of Foster SRO Corporal Richard Armstrong
DATE: November 9, 1998

We, the undersigned, respectfully request that the Gainesville City Commission investigate the matter of the transfer of GPD Corporal Richard Armstrong away from duty as SRO for Stephen Foster Elementary School. We have reason to believe that certain administrative difficulties exist within the SRO branch of GPD and that these problems are negatively impacting a community of hundreds of people, many of them children at Stephen Foster School.

On October 30, 1998, five parents from Stephen Foster met with GPD Chief Donald Shinnamon to protest the transfer of Cpl. Armstrong. A petition and correspondence from dozens of other parents of like mind accompanied or preceded this meeting. Chief Shinnamon is in possession of the letters and petition should you wish to see them.

It was our stated understanding in the meeting with Chief Shinnamon that Cpl. Armstrong's transfer had been effected as punishment for his responses in a confrontation with his supervisor. Our position was that while we understand that GPD is an organization that must have its policies and procedures, we felt very strongly that this particular punishment was inappropriate considering the size and nature of the community affected. Corporal Armstrong has been both enormously popular AND effective with students, parents and staff in his position at Stephen Foster, so that any decision to transfer him away from that job belies an agenda that does not take into account either the citizenry being served or the best use of a public servant.

At the above mentioned meeting, Chief Shinnamon told us that there were other reasons for Cpl. Armstrong's transfer, that were he to reveal these reasons, they would cause Cpl. Armstrong great embarrassment and that, in fact, there were also reasons that he was not permitted to reveal. Chief Shinnamon also stated that Stephen Foster's principal, Dr. Darla Boyd, was aware of these reasons and supported the transfer of Cpl. Armstrong. When one of the parents asked if all of the proceedings against Cpl. Armstrong were a matter of public record, Chief Shinnamon allowed that this was the case, but again asserted that request of the records would open Cpl. Armstrong up to great embarrassment.

We have now requested and reviewed the records and find nothing in them that Cpl. Armstrong had not already revealed to those who had asked him first hand why he was being transferred. These were the reasons generally discussed with Chief Shinnamon. Additionally, one of the parents in attendance at the meeting later asked Dr. Boyd if she had supported the transfer of Cpl. Armstrong, and she said she had not been part of that decision.

Several parents have discussed Cpl. Armstrong's transfer privately with other members of GPD who are of the opinion that there are difficulties with supervisors in the SRO. As many of us understand from various sources, Cpl. Armstrong has strong support among his peers at GPD.

We are reluctant to request intrusion into the internal affairs of GPD, but we feel that problems in the department are negatively impacting our lives and those of our children and their classmates. We found that our efforts to communicate with Chief Shinnamon were met with a certain amount of disingenousness, and we consider it imperative that our complaint to be investigated by authorities outside the department.

Signed:	Name	Phone Number
11/9/98	Cynthia & Kimbrell	418-0833
11/9/98	Kathy Brooks	377-9223
11-9-98	Christy Johnson	378-8676
11-9-98	Jay Lehnert	373-6124
11-9-98	Chris Humaya	371-4247
11-9-98	Ruth Gurdner	
11-9-98	Lou d. White	
11/9/98	Dennis, Daniel	373-9040
11/9/98	Frankie Walden	371-4076
11/9/98	Donna	377-4563
11/9/98	Suzanne Coyle	377-4563
11/9/98	C. Coyle	
11/9/98	Lyria Allen	376-1195
11/9/98	Gamble Marilyn	374-4783
11/9/98	Cynthia Hicks	372-6642

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Signed:	Name	Phone Number
<i>J. Argenio</i>	Judith A. Argenio	378-3238 / 372-7382
<i>Ingrid A. Crawford</i>	INGRID CRAWFORD	371-3389
<i>Randy E. Crawford</i>	RANDY E. CRAWFORD	371-3389
<i>Donna Mitchell</i>	Donna Mitchell	371-6661
<i>Mary Keene</i>	Mary Keene	367-9663
<i>Tony Lemmons</i>	Tony Lemmons	335-6041
<i>Shawnorris Jones</i>	Shawnorris Jones	338-2017
<i>Kimber Peck</i>	Kimber Peck	376-9560
<i>Barbara M. Freaney</i>	Barbara M. Freaney	337-9563
<i>Sharon Williams</i>	Sharon Williams	376-9645
<i>Almetta Simmons</i>	Almetta Simmons	335-4643
<i>Jeri Martin</i>	Shannon Hesters	373-3208
<i>Shannon Hesters</i>	FRANCIE MILAM	371-0492
<i>Vincent Milam</i>		371-0420
<i>Alisia Dorelli</i>	Alisia Dorelli	375-5923

Karen Waterhouse	Karen Waterhouse	367-0753
Cynthia Lowe	Cynthia Lowe	379-1801
Karen Davis	Karen Davis	338-7950

Kimberly Wilcox	Kimberly Wilcox	335-1876
Susan Morris	Susan Morris	377-4615
Bernice King	Bernice King	335-9292
Owen Williams	Owen Williams	375-4806
Michele Lara	Michele Lara	377-4703
Victoria Morgan	Victoria Morgan	379-0997

#980785

725 NW 33rd Avenue
Gainesville, FL 32609
(352) 371 - 6661

Chief Shinnamon
~~Gainesville Police Department~~
721 NW 6th Street
Gainesville, FL 32609

October 28, 1998

Dear Chief Shinnamon,

I was distressed to learn yesterday that it is your department's intention to transfer Officer Richard Armstrong away from Stephen Foster Elementary School where my nine year old daughter attends third grade. I do not know if you are aware of how much Officer Armstrong means, in a daily and one-on-one way, to dozens and dozens of children at the school, but this is something I witness many times each week. Not only do I see the smiles and hugs and hear the encouraging words that children receive from Mr. Armstrong, I see in the kids' own faces and attitudes the positive effects of his attention. It's a gift to be able to communicate with children in this way.

As a parent volunteer this year and last at Stephen Foster, I am also personally aware of how many children at the school are in great need of a friendly and familiar face that is reliably there for them. The kids I have tutored at Stephen Foster are clearly encouraged by and responsive to steady attention they can predictably receive from an interested adult. If my once-a-week contact is so meaningful, how much more so are those daily contacts with personnel such as Mr. Armstrong. As well you know, consistency is extremely valuable in children's lives.

If my child's response is any example, Officer Armstrong is also talented in the way that he addresses kids in the classroom. My daughter has quoted at length from talks Officer Armstrong has given, and it was clear that he was able to make more of an impression on her about the dangers of smoking, for instance, than anything I had said on the subject.

Additionally, it is a measure of assurance to me, as a parent, to know that an officer thoroughly familiar with the school, its students and families, and its employees is there on a daily basis providing security and handling emergencies. A new officer would be a long time in learning what Officer Armstrong currently knows.

In sum and with all due respect, I find it difficult to imagine what departmental concerns could justify the disruption to the daily lives of so many children and the interference with the peace of mind of parents, faculty and staff who are aware of Mr. Armstrong's influence. My hope is that you are able to reconsider Officer Armstrong's reassignment and retain him at Stephen Foster. From my vantage as a citizen, I believe such a decision would best serve the interests of the community.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Donna Mitchell

#980785



A chain is only as strong as it's weakest link.

Without Cpl. Armstrong we are all weak and incomplete...

October 30, 1998

Mr. Shinnamon:

Did you ever struggle with which school to enroll your children in? On the first day of kindergarten did you wonder, even if just for a second, that you may have made the wrong choice? Did the same questions arise as your children proceeded through middle school, then high school, and even more recently, college? Did you ever worry about their safety at school, strangers, peer pressure, a bad teacher? Did you ever wish that you could watch over them at all times, maybe without them knowing it, and protect them when they needed it most?

I did.

This year I enrolled my only child in kindergarten at Stephen Foster Elementary. To date, that decision was the hardest one I have ever made in my life. I struggled with it for nearly three years. Previously my son attended pre-school and then pre-K at Martha Manson Academy on Tower Road. MMA is one of our best and most expensive private elementary schools in Gainesville. MMA has dedicated teachers and staff, a challenging curriculum, and a low student-to-teacher ratio (10-1). **Safety was never an issue.** However everything has a price and mine was that I could only afford to keep him at MMA as long as I worked in a job with long hours thus leaving little time for my son. I began to consider leaving the workforce but would not follow through until I was completely satisfied with our zoned public school, Stephen Foster Elementary.

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Hidden Heroes

'They come up and hug him'

By JULIE GARRETT

Sun staff writer

Corporal Richard Armstrong of the Gainesville Police Department finds himself in an enviable position. He's working at a job he loves, "by far the best job I've ever had," and he's won the affection of hundreds of children.

Last fall, Armstrong, 42, began working as Stephen Foster Elementary School's full-time resource officer, and right away, says clerical aide Mary Beth Lassiter, the calls started.

Who was this officer who took so much time to start each child's day with a smile?

Who was this officer who called the children by name?

Who was this man who could tell if a child needed a kind word or a pat on the back?

"I could tell by the amount of calls that were coming in that the parents were thrilled to have such a positive male role model," Lassiter said. "He's everybody's uncle or brother or father. They gravitate to him. I've never seen anything like it."

Since Lassiter has worked at Stephen Foster for 20 years, that's quite a compliment. "We thought our last officer was good, and he was, but Corporal Armstrong is just extraordinary."

GPD assigns resource officers to schools where some of the students come from high-crime neighborhoods. Armstrong said often these children have seen neighbors and family members arrested. They learn to at least distrust police, and at worst, to flat-out hate them. He said the program's main focus is to establish a rapport with these children.

"They were afraid to come near an officer," says Lassiter. "Now they come up and hug him."

"I do love kids. I love 'em to death," Armstrong said. He explains that when he was a young man choosing his career, it was a toss-up between teaching and police work. Now he gets to do both. "I'm happy all day long," he said, laughing a great belly laugh and smiling an immense alligator smile.

Of course, like a true hero, Armstrong modestly adds: "The real heroes in this school are the teachers. They do a phenomenal job."

Well, yes. But let's see what people have to say about him.

"He's good with the kids. He's concerned about them. He treats them as if they're his own," says parent volunteer Sandra Scribener.

"He's everywhere," says Rich Stalbaum, behavior resource teacher. "He does things he doesn't have to do



BRENDAN FITTERER/Special to The
Corporal Richard Armstrong of the Gainesville Police Department visits with students at Stephen Foster Elementary School.

"He's a friend, but he can put his police face on," says aide Sherry Gemma.

Armstrong is very much a presence at the school. He puts on safety and anti-smoking campaigns in the classrooms. He monitors the lunchroom for about two hours a day. He helps in the evenings whenever there's a special event like a spaghetti dinner or a talent show.

One afternoon someone's car caught fire at parent pickup; it was Armstrong to the rescue.

"He knew just what to do. He had it under control. We feel so safe with him here," says Lassiter.

Armstrong is the father of Amanda, 14, and Matthew, 10. "I don't try to be anyone's stand-in father, but being a father helps tremendously," he said. Although his children live with their mother, he maintains a close relationship with them.

Two years ago Armstrong underwent multiple-bypass open heart surgery. The stress of his marriage ending and 10 years on patrol wore him out. His job at