



Training Rangers in Pensacola, Florida

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Kirk Noonan

Loud rap music pulsates through the air. The sun is descending over the Attucks Court Housing Projects. In a classroom at nearby Fricker Recreational Center, 23 boys await the start of the Royal Rangers meeting. As Commander Mike Simmons goes to the podium, the boys — most 11 years old or younger — sit up straight. Silence seizes the room.

“Aten-hut,” shouts Simmons.

The boys stand and snap to attention.

“Whose army are we in?” Simmons asks, drill sergeantlike.

“God’s army,” the boys yell back.

For nine years Simmons, a police officer, has been running Royal Rangers outreaches in Pensacola’s projects.

“God has worked through the Royal Rangers program,” he says. “If

you can make inroads with these guys while they are children, you can make a difference in their lives.”

“The most significant thing that happens in our church happens on the streets where people from our church are touching other people,” says Jim Hale, pastor of Pensacola First Assembly of God. “For many of these kids, this is their only chance to meet Christ. The seeds sown can’t be replaced by anything else — so we keep sowing.”

On a ball field, the boys march in lockstep. Half of them wear the olive drab shirt and bright blue beret that make up part of the Royal Rangers uniform. Simmons says if a boy comes three weeks in a row he earns the right to wear the uniform for an evening.

“I am getting my uniform next week,” says a 10-year-old boy. “I will

feel proud when I get it because I’ll finally be a Royal Ranger, and when I am 14 I can be a Trailblazer.”

Terry, father of two of the boys here tonight, says Royal Rangers is making a difference in the children’s lives.

“Some of the boys only come for the uniform,” he says. “But the uniform gives the volunteers a chance to tell the boys about Jesus.”

The boys file back into the classroom against the backdrop of distant sirens. Inside, Simmons and the other volunteers discuss last year’s camp-out before a devotional is shared. When the meeting ends, the uniforms are returned to the lockers. As the boys pile into the church vans, 12-year-old T.J. explains why he comes each week.

“I get to learn about God,” he says, “and how to camp and tie ropes, but mostly I come to learn about God.” ■