

SUFFOLK COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT



COMMON GROUND

JULY 2025



SCSD'S ART PROGRAMMING
TRANSFORMING LIVES



SHERIFF'S MESSAGE

JULY, 2025

Welcome to this edition of the Common Ground Newsletter.

In this issue, we feature our recent collaboration with the Massachusetts Environmental Police and Winthrop Harbor Master in support of the Hanson-Milone Act of 2024, which requires operators of seafaring vessels in Massachusetts to be trained and certified. In partnership with other marine units and law enforcement agencies, we launched a Boater Safe-

ty Certification Course to help residents meet these requirements and promote safer waterways.

We also highlight two impactful rehabilitation programs within our facilities. Our Women's Empowerment Group, led by two formerly incarcerated women, offers support and inspiration to women remanded to our facilities as they prepare for reentry into society. Our newly re-launched art program for residents at the House of Correction provides a therapeutic outlet for expression and healing.

Other stories in this edition of the Common Ground include: a visit from WorldBoston's Citizen Diplomacy Program; a celebration of Juneteenth in Hyde Park, where I was honored with the 2025 Living History Makers Award; the latest recipients of our Officer of the Month Award; another selection from The Intersection; and stories about our Department's work Around Suffolk County.

I hope that you'll enjoy reading these and other stories in this issue, and I look forward to bringing you more insight and information about the form and functions of the Department in the editions to come.

~Sheriff Steven W. Tompkins

COMMON GROUND NEWSLETTER

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SCSD JOINS STATEWIDE EFFORT TO OFFER FREE BOATER SAFETY CERTIFICATION CLASSES

As boaters across Massachusetts gear up to hit the water this Summer, the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department is assisting residents with a critical new safety measure requiring all seafaring vessel operators to be adequately trained and certified.

In an effort to help boaters to comply with the Hanson-Milone Act of 2024, the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department has joined forces with the Massachusetts Environmental Police, the Winthrop Police Department, the Boston Police Department, the State Police, and other Marine Law Enforcement Agencies to provide free in-person Boater Safety Certification classes to the public.

Passed in 2024, the Hanson-Milone Act bears the name of David Hanson, the young man who tragically lost his life in a boating accident in Kingston, Massachusetts in 2010, and Paul Milone, a longtime Weymouth Harbormaster and boating safety advocate. The law, which applies to all operators of motorized boats, is designed to increase boater safety and prevent boating accidents, injuries, and fatalities, and mandates that anyone born after January 1, 1989 must obtain a Boater Safety Certificate by April 1, 2026, while those born before that date must comply by April 1, 2028. The law applies to all operators of motorized boats. Personal watercraft operators must be at least 16 years old and certified, and anyone aged 12 or older may complete the course and operate a vessel under adult supervision. Certification is achieved after completing the 12-hour course and passing a final exam, after which the Massachusetts Environmental Police issue a card certificate that must be carried every time on board.

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department and its partners have been delivering these certification classes in Winthrop since May of 2025, with lead instructors Sergeant Dennis DeCarney of the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department and Captain Kevin Janielis, a retired SCSD Officer and current Executive Officer and Deputy Shellfish Warden of the Winthrop Harbormaster's Department. Sergeant DeCarney and Janielis have been leading three-day courses at the Robert A. DeLeo Senior Center in Winthrop. Each session includes four-hour daily classes covering boating laws, equipment safety, navigation, weather awareness, accident prevention, emergency response, and more. Their dedication to safety is rooted in long-standing public service careers and a shared understanding of the dangers that exist on the water when operators are untrained or unprepared.

"This class is the best thing to happen in a long time," said Janielis. "We've seen far too many tragic incidents—boat crashes, propeller injuries, drownings. This course arms boaters with the knowledge and skills of prevention."

Sergeant DeCarney has served with the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department for over 15 years and has spent an additional 16 years with the Winthrop Harbormaster Department. Earlier this year, he was officially assigned to the Sheriff's Deputy Marine Patrol, a full-time position focused on patrol, enforcement, and education. When the Hanson-Milone Act passed, DeCarney and Janielis stepped forward to become certified instructors under the Environmental Police. They completed a thorough vetting and training process and began teaching classes in the spring. The course concluded with an exam, and successful participants received their official boating safety certificate by mail from the Massachusetts Environmental Police. These certificates are valid in other states through reciprocal agreements and must be shown upon request by law enforcement while operating a vessel.

DeCarney emphasized that the course, though 12 hours long, is time well spent,



sharing. "A lot of people get out there without knowing the basics. This program helps them understand the rules, the risks, and the right way to operate a boat."

Classes guide participants through everything from navigating state and federal waters to inspecting safety equipment, reading hazard signs, understanding weather patterns, and responding to emergencies. For DeCarney, the focus is on preparation and prevention. "The last thing we want to do is give out tickets," he said. "We want to educate people before anything goes wrong."

His partner in this effort, Kevin Janielis, brings over 44 years of public service experience. A retired Captain of the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department, Janielis served for 32 years before joining the Winthrop Harbormaster's Department. He and DeCarney are also licensed U.S. Coast Guard captains and Massachusetts State-Certified Harbormasters—a credential that requires years of service and specialized coursework to obtain. Janielis jokes that retirement didn't last long for him.

"Dennis called me and said there was an

opening at the Harbormaster's office," he recalled. "I signed up, and 14 years later, I'm still here." Together, he and DeCarney have not only taught classes but performed countless water rescues. "We've pulled kids out of the water, helped families whose boats broke down, even responded to crashes," Janielis said. "Saving someone's life, it's very uplifting."

Janielis believes the course offers crucial information, especially for families and first-time boaters. "We get questions like, 'What do I do if the person driving the boat goes down?' This course answers that. We teach how to use a VHF radio, how to anchor properly, how to call the Coast Guard—things every passenger should know." He also encourages residents to take the in-person class, which is free of charge, rather than the online versions that cost \$40 to \$100. "In-person, you get more time, more depth, and more one-on-one instruction. It's just a better learning experience."

Due to the busy summer season, the program is currently on pause, but DeCarney and Janielis will resume teaching in the fall and winter. Classes are open to all Massachusetts residents and not restricted to those living in Winthrop.

He also emphasized the risks associated with impaired boating. "People think it's like driving a car, but it's not. Sun exposure, dehydration, and wave motion all make you feel the effects of alcohol or drugs faster and more intensely. Being intoxicated on the water is extremely dangerous."

We encourage younger boaters and members of yacht clubs to sign up ahead of next year's deadlines. To find and register for a class, residents can visit the Massachusetts Environmental Police website: www.mass.gov/OLE, which posts class schedules about one month in advance. Information is also available through the Winthrop Harbormaster and the Town of Winthrop websites. Once instructors like DeCarney and Janielis submit a request to hold a course, the state posts the dates online and opens registration. Participants must preregister through the official site, and all completed tests and paperwork are submitted back to the Environmental Police for processing and certification.

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department continues to be part of this essential collaboration, having already equipped dozens of Massachusetts boaters with the knowledge, skills, and certification necessary to enjoy the water safely. With the continued dedication of instructors like Sgt. DeCarney and Captain Janielis and the partnership of agencies across the state, the program is helping to create a safer, more informed boating community for everyone.



SCSD OFFERS EMPOWERING PROGRAMMING TO UPLIFT INCARCERATED WOMEN

In our ongoing mission to promote public safety, at the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department, we recognize that incarcerated women face unique challenges—challenges that require empathy, understanding, and tailored support. That is why programs like our Women's Empowerment Group are essential. The Women's Empowerment Group is a weekly program held at the House of Correction, creating an uplifting space for incarcerated women to connect, heal, and grow while transforming their lives. The heart of that transformation lies in the leadership of Angelia Jefferson and Chiteara Thomas, two women who once walked in the very same shoes as the participants they now uplift.

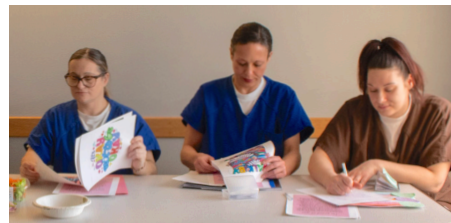
Angelia and Chiteara are not only sisters but also formerly incarcerated individuals. Angelia served 32 years coming in-and out of our facilities, and Chiteara served 17 years at MCI-Framingham. When they were released, both made a powerful choice—to turn their pain into purpose. They formed organizations committed to supporting incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. Through a shared vision and deep sisterhood, they collaborated to bring that same empowerment to the women currently in our care.

Their Women's Empowerment Group is a healing space built on trust, authenticity, and resilience. Participants engage in a six-week curriculum carefully crafted to foster growth and transformation. The sessions focus on essential themes, including Self-Worth and Identity, Healing and Resilience, Healthy Relationships and Boundaries, Goal-Setting and Future Planning, Financial Literacy and Life Skills, and Empowerment and Leadership. Through interactive activities, reflective discussions and journaling, participants are encouraged to explore their identities, process and address past trauma, and begin planning a future of possibil-

ities.

What distinguishes this group is the raw honesty and empathetic connection that Chiteara and Angelia bring to each session, teaching from their own experiences.

"We want them to be empowered to just go into the world," said Chiteara. "It's a scary place, especially after incarceration, when you don't have enough resources, or you think that you don't have anybody. A lot of these women are coming from domestic violence, from drug abuse, from broken homes. They are coming from so much trauma, which Angie and I also come from. And then, once we found the power to overcome that trauma to better ourselves, who are we not to put that back into someone else?" Shared Chiteara.



Participants have described the group as a safe, inspiring space where they feel seen, heard, and valued—often for the first time in a long while. Angelia and Chiteara's connection with participants isn't superficial; it's a deep bond born of mutual understanding.

"Our testimonies were created for a reason," said Angelia. "It's to make sure that we're touching people that are going through the same thing so that they don't have to go through it the way we did. Because a lot of us, especially in the brown communities or people who go through incarceration, trauma is all we know. And then, when we go through something where we may have to be incarcerated, we just get seen as criminals. We're not seen as somebody who went through a whole bunch of things—and maybe this is why."

This powerful work is also rooted in their leadership with Families for Justice as Healing, a Massachusetts-based organization led by women who are incarcerated or have been formerly incarcerated. The organization is committed to ending the incarceration of women and girls and building alternatives through community-led solutions. Their vision of public safety is one that centers on healing, not punishment—one that invests in housing, healthcare, education, and justice rather than jails.

For Angelia and Chiteara, this work is also profoundly personal. "We'll continue to change lives," said Chiteara. "Because when I was in prison, we, the women, used to talk about the groups that came to talk to us and say things like, 'Oh my goodness, what time is it? What are they talking about?' We didn't understand it. They weren't saying anything that resonated with us. They were standing up there trying to teach us something, but they had never experienced incarceration. I want to learn from someone who's been through something I've been through. I want somebody to be real with me. I don't want anybody to get up there and sugar-coat it and be fake." She added, "I think about what would have helped me and my journey along the way, and that's why I want this for them. First and foremost, we have to put God first because if it weren't for God, we wouldn't be here."

In this program, led by women who have turned hardship into healing, we see the kind of transformational, peer-led work that changes not only lives but systems. Angelia and Chiteara are living proof that the power to lead, to love, and to uplift others lies within. At the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department, we believe that healing and recovery are possible and that no one is ever beyond hope, especially when guided by those who have walked the path before them.



FOSTERING WORLDWIDE DIPLOMACY AS LEADERS IN CARCERAL HEALTHCARE

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department recently welcomed a delegation from WorldBoston's Citizen Diplomacy program as part of an intensive facility tour that showcased our leadership in correctional healthcare and reinforced grassroots diplomacy through face-to-face engagement. WorldBoston, founded in 1949 and a key member of the Global Ties U.S. network, champions local-global connections by bridging international leaders with American institutions.

The delegation of healthcare and environmental experts traveled through the Nashua Street facility, observing first-hand the daily operations that sustain our pretrial detention center. They met with Department leadership and front-line medical professionals, toured mental health wings, and were introduced to our Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) program—an evidence-based effort to address substance use disorders within the jail. This level of access demonstrates our Department's transparency and commitment to elevating the standard of care for incarcerated individuals.

From the thirteen guests, Emergency Care Physicians, Child and Ad-

olescent Psychotherapists, Health Policy Lecturers, Health Association Directors, Associate Professors, Environmental Affairs Managers, International Cooperation Directors, and a myriad of other healthcare-related professionals represented regions from across the globe. Such locales included Greenland, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Samoa, Trinidad and Tobago, Hong Kong, Ukraine, Burkina Faso, and more.

This engagement encourages our Department's citizen diplomacy, where personal interaction fosters mutual understanding. By inviting international visitors into our correctional environment, we highlight how caring for detainees is fundamentally a health and human-rights endeavor. Our partnership with WorldBoston elevates our mission of setting correctional standards that speak beyond our county, modeling operational excellence and humane treatment.

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department's medical services stand as a testament to this philosophy. With on-site urgent and routine care under clinical oversight, our facilities treat mental health, chronic conditions, dental issues, and infectious diseases while

maintaining full compliance with state and national health codes. Our protocols consistently reflect modern benchmarks, earning us recognition and positive audit results from Massachusetts Department of Public Health and accrediting bodies. The WorldBoston delegation's firsthand exposure to these systems underscored our regional role in developing correctional medicine.

Above all, the visit helped reframe incarceration as an opportunity for constructive engagement rather than isolation. Through open dialogue and experiential exchange, the Jail transcended its walls to become a venue for progress, reinforcing Sheriff Tompkins' position as an innovator in both institutional care and global civic outreach.

Special thanks to our Jail leadership team that helped conduct the tour, including Superintendent José Mojica, Superintendent Matthew Decastro, Assistant Superintendent Leteya Flambo, Assistant Deputy Superintendent Chris Buckley, Assistant Deputy Superintendent Carlos Goulart, Assistant Superintendent Rachelle Steinberg, Director of Medical Services Cindylou Lyons, and Director of Treatment & Behavior Abby LeClair.



NEW ART PROGRAM BEGINS AT HOUSE OF CORRECTION

At the Suffolk County House of Correction, our residents enjoy sitting before canvases. When the buzz of the facility fades behind the heavy doors, brushes glide across fabric, forming landscapes, cityscapes, and fragments of memory. Here, the boundaries of incarceration dissolve, giving rise to artists.

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department's Arts Program, initiated this year by Sheriff Steven W. Tompkins, aims to boost the emotional, psychological, and creative development of our residents, leading to a path toward healing, self-expression, growth, and personal transformation. Classes are held on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays in the afternoons and evenings, offering participants an opportunity to engage in various mediums, including painting, drawing, papier-mâché, sculpting, and writing.

Art has long been a powerful tool for human expression. Since its formal recognition in the 1940s as a therapeutic practice, art therapy has helped people process trauma, manage emo-

tions, and build coping mechanisms. In our Department, where nearly every resident has battled anxiety, addiction, or emotional trauma in their lives, the need for such outlets is critical, and Sheriff Steven W. Tompkins recognized this years ago.

"Our goal is to help our residents rebuild themselves in preparation for their return to society," Sheriff Tompkins shared. "Art gives them a way to process pain, build confidence, and reconnect with themselves—sometimes for the first time in years."

Leading the program is Johan Quintero, an Afro-Cuban artist who has been our art teacher for residents at the House of Correction for over five months. Raised in Florida and forged in Boston, his life has been shaped by graffiti, public art, and mentorship. Now, he brings that same creative energy and empathy to every session.

"I don't see inmates here," Johan says. "They're my students. My job is to treat them with dignity and reveal to them something they didn't know they had."

The class's curriculum began with spontaneity and gradually built structure, incorporating collaborative exercises, foundational shape studies, painting techniques, and ultimately, fully realized works. Students started skeptically, but found themselves trans-

formed through the act of creation.

"One day, one of my students came in really upset. He was just... off," Johan recalled. "So I handed him a blank canvas and said, 'Let's just start. No pressure.' As we built it out together, I could see him working through something. That painting became his emotional map."

When the program started back in March, the teaching approach within the program began with unpredictability—an exercise in collaborative spontaneity where students take turns adding to a drawing, letting go of perfection and control. Slowly, the fundamentals, shapes, motion, elements, and finally, painting are introduced. Each step is layered with intention. Johan encourages students to either trace from a reference or reimagine the world from their own perspective.

"They didn't see it at first, but as they followed the steps, they began to see their pieces come to life," Joahn shared.

One of the participants, Rajaan, known in the art room as Solo, recalls a moment when the process became deeply personal.





"I was angry. I came in with all this aggression and these thoughts... my teacher just told me to put paint on the canvas—lines, circles. As he guided me, I found myself painting what felt like my problem: loyalty. I give it away too much. Suddenly, it was all there, on the canvas. I could see it. And from there, I could choose what to do with it."

For Dennis, a class peer of Rajaan and a longtime graffiti artist, the class is a return to self. "I've always had paint in my hands," he says. "So, I didn't think I'd learn anything new. I came in hot-headed, thinking, 'What's he going to teach me?' I was wrong. I shocked myself." Dennis says the class helps him cope with daily stress. "By the time we're done, the anger is gone. It's like I can start over."

Johan sees this shift again and again during the sessions, and the classroom is often filled with quiet intensity. Participant Emmanuel describes it as a zone of peace. "I'm incarcerated, but when I'm painting, I don't feel like I am. I'm using another part of my brain. It lets me step outside of myself," he says.

"We only have two hours, but it flies. It's better than sitting in the unit trying to discipline your thoughts."

This emotional escape is shared across the group. Emmanuel explains that many of his peers paint scenes they long for—places they imagine themselves walking through, people they miss, places of peace. "It's like we're drawing the lives we want to get back to," he says. "It helps me stay focused. I never thought I'd say that, but I feel productive here. I'm not wasting time."

While the class average is six to ten students per session, it has made a lasting impact on those who attend. Johan notes that participants come from different units, including the OASIS (Opioid and Addiction Services Inside South Bay) Unit.

"One of the guys from the OASIS Unit wasn't even in the original group, but he was the first to finish a full piece. He dove right in. Now he's asking, 'What's next?' Art doesn't have to be limited to class time," he says. "Some of them draw in their cells now. They're carrying that mindset with them."

Art is a bridge to future opportunities, and within our facilities, several participants have expressed interest in starting their own clothing lines, leading to the incorporation of design work into lessons and the expansion of knowledge and skills for every individual. Johan reflects:

"If they want to draw a logo, we do that. I tell them, 'When you get out, you'll know the

steps to create something of your own.'" One student even paired a poem with his painting, demonstrating how creativity is unlocking more than one type of voice.

What began as an artistic experiment is now a model for rehabilitation. Often, our residents walk in burdened with guilt, fear, anger, and trauma. But for two hours, they become makers, creators, and dreamers. The work they produce is not always about perfection; sometimes, it's about survival. As Johan puts it, "You might be painting the same picture as someone else, but it's still going to come out different—because it's you. You're discovering something that you didn't even know was there."

Inside the walls of the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department, art is doing what even the best intentions can't always accomplish: it's restoring dignity. It's building peace. And, stroke by stroke, it's helping our incarcerated population believe in the possibility of starting again.





A REFLECTION ON JUNETEENTH

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department commemorated Juneteenth across the county in solidarity and recognition of the emancipated formerly enslaved people and an enduring legacy of their descendants in the U.S. Celebrated on June 19th, this national holiday marks the ending of slavery in 1865, when news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached the enslaved people in Galveston, Texas. Today, we remember and commemorate generations of Americans who have built this country with roots in the Black diaspora.

Sheriff Tompkins Receives Award at Hyde Park 2025 Juneteenth Joy Celebration:

In honor of Juneteenth, Hyde Park kicked off the celebration with their 2025 Juneteenth Joy event at New Mission High School, inviting Sheriff Steven W. Tompkins to be recognized on the day. As part of the Hyde Park Living Histories of Color initiative, Sheriff Tompkins received the 2025 Living History Makers award for his ongoing efforts to uplift and protect Black voices in the community.

Hosted by Together Hyde Park, the West Fairmount Hill Community Group, and a collection of community partners, the event showcased community leaders advancing the visibility of Suffolk County's Black excellence.



Our Sheriff shared the stage with City of Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll, Massachusetts Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley, City Council President Ruthzee Louijeune, Massachusetts State Representative Rob Consalvo, City Councilor Enrique Pepen, Massachusetts State Representative Brandy Fluker Reid, Deputy Director of Neighborhood Services Cecily Graham, and a host of other incredible figureheads.

With a few hundred audience members in attendance, the day was complete with a dance party, a book giveaway from Rozzie Bound Co-op, group reads from the titles *How We Show Up* and *Burnt Umber*, a public reading of some of Frederick Douglass's work, a community-building meet-up, unveiling of the 2025 Living Histories of Color honorees, a food festival, a Black-owned business market, a celebration of the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Builders and Community Service awardees, a fashion show, packed performances from local talent, and more. Artists included DJ Hustle Simmons, recording artist Christian David, the Boston Rhythm Riders, the Boston Latin Academy (BLA) Steppers, the Hip Hop 360 Dance Troupe, vocalist Katherine Shaw, KS Dance Studio, and the cast of *We Move in Color*.

Members of our Department are honored to have been invited to this celebration of Black achievement and neighborliness, and are especially proud to recognize the works of Sheriff Tompkins and all the awarded 2025 Living History Makers.

SCSD CELEBRATES OFFICERS OF THE MONTH



At the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department, we hold a deep appreciation for the dedication, leadership, and excellence demonstrated by our officers every day. Their commitment to service and public safety defines who we are, and each month, we recognize individuals who go above and beyond the call of duty. This past June, we were proud to honor three outstanding members of our Department; Suffolk County Jail Officer Emerson Thomas, Suffolk County House of Correction Captain Angel Lopez, and Suffolk County House of Correction Officer Jeff St. Surin.

Jail Officer Emerson Thomas, who has been with the Department for over three years, demonstrated his professionalism during a hospital shift when he was faced with a tense situation when the inmate he was supervising became involved in an incident with medical staff. Without hesitation, Officer Thomas stepped in to assist, helping to de-escalate the situation and ensuring the safety and comfort of the nurses involved. His actions were formally recognized in a report submitted by hospital staff, commending his support and calm under pressure. Jail Superintendent Jose Mojica and Assistant Deputy Superinten-

dent Leteya Flambo praised him as someone "kind and exemplary," noting his consistent dedication to his duties every day.

Officer Thomas began his journey with the Department while still a college student. Today, he reflects on his path with gratitude and humility: "I've been working as an officer for three years, and I'm here to help troubled people, supervise them, and work as a team to keep everyone safe. Getting this recognition makes me feel very humble and emotional. Everything I've achieved in life is because of God." Concluded Officer Thomas.

HOC Captain Angel Lopez, a member of the Department since 1998, was recognized for his leadership and precision during a recent operation. Superintendent Michael Lally and Assistant Superintendent Mark Lawhorne shared, "Acting on investigative intelligence, Captain Lopez conducted a targeted cell search that uncovered a hidden cell phone, a charger, and thousands of dollars worth of K2 contraband—eliminating a serious security threat, thus keeping everyone safe."

Captain Lopez credits his broad experience in the Department through various areas and rise through the ranks as well as collabo-

orative work with Law Enforcement partners, including the Gang Intelligence Unit and the Boston Police Youth Violence Strike Force, as vital to his effectiveness. Reflecting on the recognition, he shared: "Receiving this recognition is truly humbling. It is both an honor and a source of pride. Personally, it reinforces my commitment to the work I do, and professionally, it motivates me to continue striving for excellence."

HOC Officer Jeff St. Surin, rounding out our June honorees is HOC Officer Jeff St. Surin, whose attentiveness during routine rounds led to a life-saving intervention. While conducting an inmate count, Officer St. Surin noticed something was off in one of the cells inside the unit. Trusting his instincts, he investigated further and discovered an inmate in distress. His swift response and vigilance directly saved a life.

Superintendent of the House of Correction, Michael Lally and Assistant Superintendent Mark Lawhorne commended Officer St. Surin's quick thinking and unwavering dedication, calling him a true example of integrity in action, while sharing, "Officer Surin reminds us that true vigilance goes beyond the checklist."

These stories remind us that excellence is often found in everyday moments. Join us in celebrating Officers Thomas, Captain Lopez, and Officer St. Surin for their remarkable service.

Now, it's your turn. Know someone who deserves to be recognized? Nominate a colleague for Officer of the Month today. Let's continue celebrating excellence among us.



THE COMPLEXITIES OF SPORTS, RACE, AND ACTIVISM IN BOSTON

I recently had the privilege of delivering opening remarks for a symposium on Race, Sports, and Politics hosted by my alma mater Boston College. With the recent celebration of the 75th Anniversary of the integration of Black players into the National Basketball Association (NBA), I was inspired to share a few of my observations from that presentation about Boston's complex relationship between race and sports.

As many are keenly aware, Boston is something of a contradiction with respect to race and politics. And, while its sports teams have sometimes followed suit, they've often led the way to progress even as the city around them struggled to do the same.

The Boston Celtics are a great example. Before the Basketball Association of America and the National Basketball League merged in 1949, founding today's modern NBA, teams shunned Black players. But, in 1950, the Celtics became the first NBA team to draft a Black player in Chuck Cooper, the beginning of many "firsts" in both racial equality and success in the sport. The Celtics also became the first to field a team of five Black starters, defying the league's unspoken quotas, and they were the first team in the NBA to have a Black head coach in the legendary Bill Russell.

In 1960, the Boston Patriots chose the iconic Ron Burton as their first-ever draft pick in the American Football League. By 2016, the New England Patriots would start Jacoby Brissett, their first Black quarterback.

Over in the National Hockey League, eight years after the Celtics broke the NBA's color barrier, Willie O'Ree would take the ice against the Montreal Canadiens as the first Black player to suit-up for the Boston Bruins.

Holding up the other end of the contradiction, was George Preston Marshall, avowed segregationist and owner of the National Football League's Boston Braves. Marshall, who would later re-brand the Braves as the "Redskins" and move them to Washington, D.C. was not only against

allowing Blacks into the NFL, but he was the driving force behind a "gentlemen's agreement" that prevented the other owners around the league from drafting them from 1933 until 1946, when two owners opted to draft Black players. He continued in his refusal to integrate all the way up to 1962, relenting only after US Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy threatened to take legal action to revoke the Redskins' lease at D.C. Stadium if he didn't comply.

And, though many fans of the Boston Red Sox can claim heroes like Jim Rice, Ellis Burks, Pedro Martinez, Mo Vaughn and "Big Papi" David Ortiz, among others, it wasn't until 1959 that the team signed its first Black player, infamously becoming the last Major League Baseball team to integrate, some 14 years after Jackie Robinson first broke the MLB's color line.



Once again embodying contradiction, reports of then-owner Thomas Yawkey actively resisting integration and using racial epithets – which continue to be disputed by present-day historians and sportswriters – have prompted the renaming of Yawkey Way at Fenway Park, even as the Yawkey Foundation continues to support many diverse initiatives that include cultural, educational, and human service organizations in Boston and beyond.

Of course, even when Boston teams welcomed Black players, there were no guarantees that the city they played in would do the same.

In the powerful MAX documentary series "Celtics City," not only is the rich history of basketball's most storied and successful franchise expertly explored, but also the implications of the Celtics' increasingly Black roster at a time of racial upheaval across the country.

Providing another great example of the recurring contradictions mentioned at the beginning is Bill Russell's entry in the series.

Russell was one of the most prolific winners in the history of sport, leading the Celtics to an unsurpassed eleven championships in his career as a player and, later, as a player/coach. It wasn't until his arrival to the team that Boston would win its first title. But, despite all of the glory that he delivered to the city through his toil and talent, and as much as the team and the organization and many of the fans would support him, he still endured a steady barrage of both subtle and blatant racism throughout his career.

Not one to suffer fools gladly, Russell became an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, spurred by his own experiences and tragedies like the murder of Medgar Evers. Whether it was Russell's marches with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., his boycotting of a game in a city that refused service to Black patrons, or his speaking out against racism, segregation and human rights abuses, he and his family often became the target of death threats and racist reprisals from some of the members of the city that he literally gave his body to.

These experiences provoked Russell's famous statement that "he didn't play for Boston, he played for the Celtics." In a display of the trademark support that he would give to his star player over their years together, coach Red Auerbach ordered that the wording on the team jersey be transformed from its familiar "Boston" insignia to read "Celtics" out of respect for Russell and the shared reality of his fellow Black teammates.

Today, Celtics Jaylen Brown and Jayson Tatum, and retired Patriots Jason and Devin McCourty are among several athletes proudly embodying Russell's civic activism. And, though others have sought to discourage and demean athletes for speaking out against injustice, history has taught us that change has never been made by those content to just "shut up and dribble."

AROUND SUFFOLK COUNTY



Mayor Michelle Wu's Neighborhood Coffee Hours:

Members of the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department have joined City of Boston Mayor Michelle Wu and her administration for her 2025 Neighborhood Coffee Hours, which are part of the City's ongoing efforts to advance neighborhood wellness, visibility, and grassroots democracy. Throughout the month of June, these events were hosted across the city, where participants were encouraged to voice city-related concerns, partake in shared Dunkin' Donuts-donated food, and learn about the role of local departments. To educate the public about the role of the Sheriff's Department and strengthen our relationships with local leadership, the Department has come out to attend as many Coffee Hours and connect with as many residents as possible.

Cruiser Convoy for Special Olympics Massachusetts:

Officers from the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department proudly helped to kick off the 2025 Special Olympics Massachusetts Summer Games at Harvard's Athletic Complex. As participants in both the annual Cruiser Convoy and the medal ceremony, our team was honored to stand alongside and support these inspiring athletes. We extend our sincere thanks to Special Olympics Massachusetts for inviting us to participate in such a meaningful event.



Corrib Road Race:

The 31st annual Corrib Classic 5K Race & Community Celebration kicked off the start of June in West Roxbury, bringing together thousands of runners, residents, and city officials. Our officers attended the day with a cruiser ready to spark social interaction, in turn supporting Suffolk County's athletes while building bridges of trust between families in the crowd and local law enforcement. With proceeds from the race reinvested back into the community, the Corrib Charitable Trust reminds us how to center philanthropy in athletics. SCSD is honored to have been invited.

El Mundo Boston Latino Family Festival:

The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department participated in this year's El Mundo Boston Latino Family Festival at Fenway Park — New England's largest family-friendly Latinx celebration. On Sunday, June 8, thousands gathered for over five hours of lively music, dancing, interactive games, cultural performances, health screenings, and 65+ vendor booths showcasing food, local services, and community resources. It was especially powerful for our team to attend and distribute coloring books to children, reminding families of the Latinidad force serving in the fields of correction and public safety.

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