

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

◆ Latino Police Officers Association ◆

George I. Sánchez Award



At a time in America when the relations between communities of color and law enforcement are very tense, Omaha, Nebraska has been traveling down a different road, thanks largely to the efforts of the Latino Peace Officers Association (LPOA).

Founded 15 years ago in South Omaha, where a large number of low-income families of color live, the LPOA's influence has spread throughout the city. Through their school visits, athletic programs, and Christmas and Easter events, the police officer volunteers in the LPOA are spreading a positive message to youth: "We care about you, we believe in you, and we are going to help you stay in school and out of gangs and away from drugs."

Knowing that kids from poor families could not afford baseball or soccer teams with uniforms, the LPOA created free baseball and soccer leagues for them. The LPOA police officer volunteers serve as coaches and mentors for the kids. There are 13,600 soccer players and 1,050 baseball players in LPOA's racially diverse leagues.

Omaha Boys and Girls Clubs official Francisco "Paco" Fuentes says: "The LPOA thinks big!" Through creativity, determination and perseverance, they have been able to serve thousands of youth that have taken part in their leagues. Likewise, every year they host an Easter Egg Hunt and Christmas party for thousands of children. In addition, the University of Nebraska at Omaha baseball team has partnered with LPOA volunteers in running a week-long, baseball-skills summer camp for Omaha youth.

"It is through these vital programs and activities that the LPOA creates improved human relations with the community at large. It truly has culminated in a wonderful win-win situation. And by promoting empathy and understanding through healthy dialogue and interaction, LPOA members teach children that human and civil rights are paramount in life."

On any given night in the summer, on the LPOA league fields, one will see not only Latino kids playing, but also Sudanese, Somali, African American and White kids having fun together. "It's a beautiful sight," says a LPOA volunteer.

Over the years, the LPOA's membership has grown and become more diverse. It now includes police officers of all races and ethnicities.

Since the outset of LPOA, gang recruitment in South Omaha is down more than 70 percent and violent crimes related to gangs is down 85 percent.