Carrigan students learn police practices of an actual ‘crime scene investigation’

WEST HAVEN (April 2, 2012) – Investigating the clues left behind at the murder scene just like the police do, students in the “Kids in the Neighborhood” program at Carrigan Intermediate School sifted through fingerprint cards, examined blood and other evidence and tried to match the evidence to a perpetrator as part of a recent field trip to learn more about crime scene investigation (CSI).

About 20 Carrigan students, part of the West Haven Community House’s Positive Youth Development after school enrichment program, visited the West Haven police headquarters recently to learn the techniques and skills that police use to solve crimes, including homicide.

Students wore their CSI – Carrigan Student Investigators – ID badges during the visit, and followed the police presentation closely, taking notes and listening intently, as officers from the West Haven police department outlined the many steps that need to be taken to secure and then investigate the clues left behind at a crime scene.

West Haven Detective Tammy Murray, a 15-year veteran, led the exercise, detailing to students what the police do when there’s a crime. Det. Murray made the clear distinction that what students see on television, like on the popular CSI: Crime Scene Investigation or its spin-offs, CSI-Miami and CSI-New York. “The TV shows are not all that accurate” in the manner they depict a crime scene investigation, Det. Murray said. “It doesn’t really happen the way they show it on TV.”
One of the first exercises for students was to watch a video where 21 scene changes were made, not all apparent to the eye, Det. Murray said, because viewers were concentrating on the action in the forefront. But when the video was replayed after a discussion of all 21 changes – it was agreed that students had “missed a lot.”

Det. Murray then explained the ‘theory of exchange,” whereby if two items touch, as in a crime scene, “the perpetrator will bring something to the scene and will likely take something away.” For instance, she said, a criminal may leave fingerprints at a scene but might also take away cat hair on their clothing or shoes.

Police must also be careful to observe an individual’s U.S. Constitutional rights, including the 4th Amendment of the Constitution that forbids unreasonable searches and seizures. “We (the police) have to ask ourselves, ‘Are we legally there?’ when coming upon a potential crime scene,” she said. If not, then the police must secure permission from a court for a search warrant, which “might take hours” under normal circumstances.

Once at a crime scene, the police must follow certain procedures, Det. Murray said, in processing evidence, including: recognizing clues, proper documentation and collection of evidence, preservation of the crime scene and finally, the analysis of all the evidence that was collected.

“Some crime scenes take days to process,” Det. Murray told students, and showed another video where critical pieces of information might be overlooked at first watching.

She also told students, “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” In other words, just because there is no apparent evidence left
behind, it does not mean something didn’t happen there.

She then reviewed several of the techniques police at a crime scene, including using black powder to ID fingerprints, applying tape to a surface to lift fingerprints, and the use of a Cyanoacrylate Fuming Chamber that helps process latent fingerprints on non-porous surfaces.

Other documentation techniques police might use at a crime scene include: video, still photography, notes, sketches, diagrams and crime scene mapping.

Students were also versed in bloodstain pattern analysis, which examines sizes, shapes and patterns of blood. They also reviewed how blood will react under certain circumstances, as well as fingerprint identification.

For fingerprint ID, Det. Murray explained the unique “loop,” “arch” and “whorl” patterns found in human fingerprints.

She noted that putting together the clues from a crime scene is like “working on a puzzle.” Finding how the pieces fit together is vital to crime scene analysis.

With the information on how to process a crime scene using the techniques they were taught, students were then presented with a case story of a homicide involving colorfully named characters, including Tammy Tie-Died (the murder victim), Lou Zar, Robin Banks and Pat Downe.

Students were taken to a
special room at West Haven police station where a simulated crime scene was set up. There, they identified and tagged evidence, and later analyzed fingerprints, the statements from suspects and other evidence found at the scene. They also visited the forensics lab at police headquarters.

After a careful review of the evidence, the majority of students did indeed correctly identify “Robin Banks” as the murderer, for which they received a hearty congratulations from Det. Murray and the other police officers on hand for a job well done!

“What a great presentation,” said Carol James, School Age program director at the West Haven Community House, afterwards. “All the officers and especially Det. Murray did a wonderful job bringing the topic of crime scene investigation to life for our students.”

Other West Haven police officers on hand included Officer Courtney Dorsi, Sgt. David Tammaro, Captain Richard DiMeola, Detective William Oakley, Officer Chris Cinque and Officer Bret Schneider.

For more information on this story or other West Haven Community House programs, contact Chris Carroll at (203) 932-5221, ext. 133.