

THE TWO RIVER TIMES

## SCENE

THE WEEK OF JANUARY 19 - 26, 2017



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# Joey Fields

## POLICING WITH COMPASSION

IF YOU TALK to Chris Melvin about his best buddy Joey Fields – they've known each other since they were 2 – you'd think he might have grown up to be an artist. "He could draw *anything*," Melvin said. Or a comic. "If there was any humor in the classroom, it was coming from Joey Fields' corner." Or an athlete. "He was really good, but he never played organized sports in high school because he was always working after school."

If you talk to Juan Sardo who volunteers with Fields at the Red Bank-based charity Lunch Break running an all-male mentor group for boys from fifth grade through high school, you might think Fields would be a social worker or community activist. "We care about kids in the community and take time to get to know them," Sardo said. "If there is one word I would use to describe where Joey is coming from, it's compassion."

Donald Rogers helped Fields start FLAG (Father's Love And Guidance) for Sunday afternoon flag football games with fathers and sons, and boys who needed positive male role models. He credits Fields with helping him get his life back on track. "He was there for me. He reached out his hand and gave me a new direction."

So maybe Fields, who grew up in Red Bank living in Montgomery Terrace on the city's West Side, might have become a minister.

Instead, he became a cop.

Now a 25-year veteran of the Red Bank police department, he was promoted to sergeant last August. He's even eligible for retirement. But don't bet on that.

"I feel like I've got more to do," said Fields, who worked his way up from walking a beat, to being an investigator for the Detective Bureau, to running the Juvenile Division.

During an 8 a.m. interview at police headquarters last Sunday following Fields' third overnight 12-hour shift in three days – a regular rotation – he talked about growing up in a tight-knit family, giving back to his community, and being humbled by his experiences. He also laughed often. He is known for that.

Married with two children, his wife Lenise Fields owns the Twinkle Twinkle Little Stars Child Care Center in Lakewood. Daughter Jaida, a senior at Donovan Catholic High School in Toms River, is looking at colleges and plans to be a nurse. Son Joey is a junior attending Central Connecticut State University on a football scholarship and studying criminology.

His father John Fields, now deceased, was a painter and maintenance man. His mother Evelyn was a maintenance worker at Brookdale Community College, Lincroft. Ask her about her three children and you won't get a word in edgewise for the next 20 minutes. Her eldest son John is a professional DJ who travels the world and her daughter Jamie, the youngest, is a nurse.

"I raised my kids old-school. I kept them busy. I signed them up for whatever was free in town. When I didn't have the money for swimming lessons at the YMCA I offered to clean it," she said.

"They were never in trouble. You never saw them out on the streets," she said. "I taught them to treat people the way they wanted to be treated and that you got out of life what you put into it."

Joey Fields has put a lot into his 47 years.

"My parents kept us very close," he said about his childhood. "We have no regrets, my brother and sister and I. We always say, if we could go back one day in that apartment and just live. Be 13. It was a great time."

Fields played recreational sports growing up, but not in high school, due to after-school jobs. Before school he delivered the Star-Ledger newspaper. He described himself as an average student who got along with everybody and was known for making people laugh.

After high school he attended Brookdale Community College. He was mulling joining the military or going into law enforcement. He took the tests for both careers and when a patrolman's job opened up in Red Bank. He applied and was hired.

"Everything kind of lined up," he said. "Looking back, I was glad it was Red Bank."

He said he got some pushback from people in his community who were anti-police. Now they respect him.

"I actually work with their kids now," Fields said. "They're the ones that call me when something happens, or if they're looking for advice. It's a plus to have come from that area."

He also believes that coming from Montgomery Terrace he had to prove himself to the officers who didn't like some of the people from that neighborhood.

"I'm still friends with everybody, including some who got in trouble," he explained. "You have to build up trust with people

at work. Some people you can't hang with like you used to. But you can still speak to them, help them.

"It's good when I have to go to Montgomery Terrace on a case 'cause I can say 'I grew up right there' and point at my old apartment," he added.

Fields is the kind of officer who visits a house during his shift and comes back later with a bag of groceries. Or he pulls up in his patrol car with a bunch of fresh cupcakes leftover from an office birthday party and hands them out. Or volunteers to take kids from the local Boys & Girls Clubs fluke fishing.

Fields taught D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) to fifth graders at Red Bank Middle School and St. James Elementary School.

"I did that for years and I *loved, loved, loved* it," he said. "I got to be proactive instead of after-the-fact."

He also taught G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education and Training) to sixth graders at Red Bank Middle School, where 15 years ago he started an annual basketball game between police officers, students and faculty.

"The kids get to see the officers in a different light. They're not in uniform," Fields explained. "We play all the grades, then we play against the teachers. We let the kids

win. We don't let the teachers win."

His impact on Red Bank may be hard to measure in numbers. But last year he was the keynote speaker for a Black History Month event at Red Bank Regional High School.

On April 28 he will be inducted into the school's Distinguished Alumni Hall of Fame during a special ceremony.

"I was thrilled and felt honored to speak at RBR as well as selected to their Hall of Fame."

Often when organizations hand out awards it may be time to retire.

Fields isn't planning on it, but has plans for when he does. "I didn't have a chance to study abroad. I'd like to go somewhere and volunteer. Somewhere where I can see something different, learn things, absorb things. When you do something like that it humbles you. You appreciate what you got."

He also wants to get some decent sleep, visit every NFL stadium in the country, and go camping where it's quiet and peaceful.

"I haven't changed at all. I'm the same person I always was."

By Gretchen C. Van Benthuisen

DANNY SANCHEZ

