

Business **New Haven**

OCTOBER 2015

www.ConnTact.com

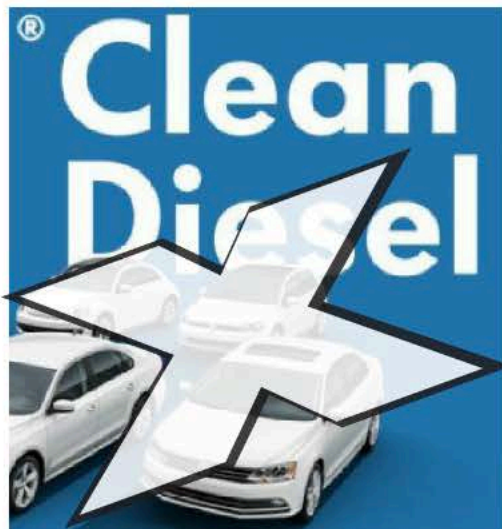
\$1.50

Connecticut Law Firm Files Suit Against VW

Carmody Rolls In For a Potential Win Years Down the Road

By Mitchell Young

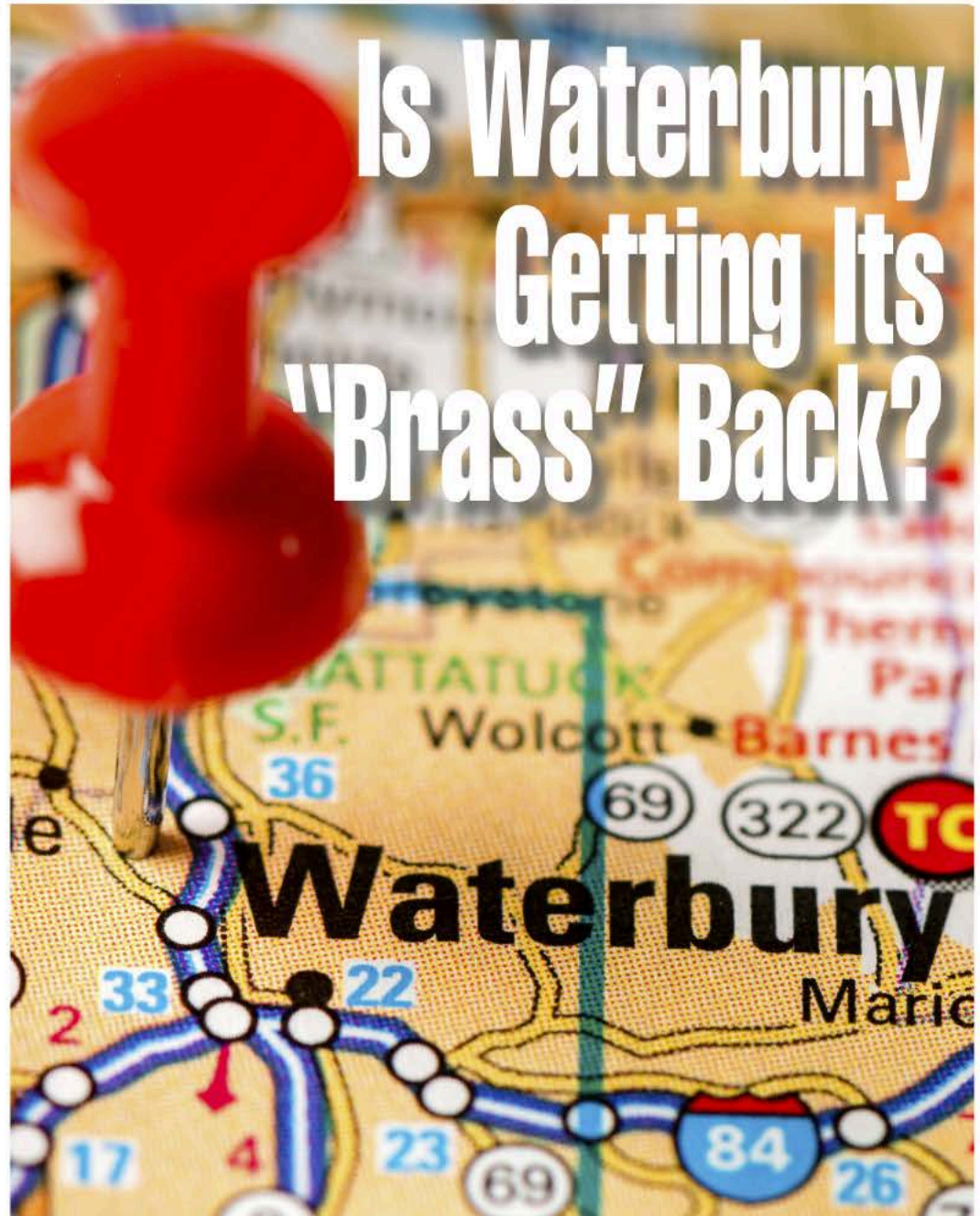
Waterbury: Carmody Torrance Sandak & Hennessey LLP has brought a class action lawsuit against Volkswagen Group of America, Inc. and Volkswagen AG for the alleged misrepresentation in the marketing and sales of what the company called "clean diesel" vehicles.



Carmody attorneys **Ann Rubin** and **Lauren Taylor** are lead counsel in the suit for the Connecticut regional firm, which has offices in Waterbury, New Haven, Southbury and Stamford. Rubin had been Carmody's managing partner from 2005-2011 the first female managing partner of a major law firm in Connecticut.

Taking on major class action suits is not simple business, but Carmody has had some recent successes including an antitrust and intellectual property case in which the firm won \$47.3 million in 2014, one of the biggest verdicts in the country.

Continued on page 9



Is Waterbury Getting Its "Brass" Back?

Once an industrial powerhouse – Waterbury has struggled to make a comeback. In this first in a three part series, reporter Derek Torrellas discovers how community is the new power in economic development

Getting Down To Brass Tacks In Waterbury

Once a world renowned manufacturing center with a thriving center city – Waterbury's leaders seek revival by making it personal

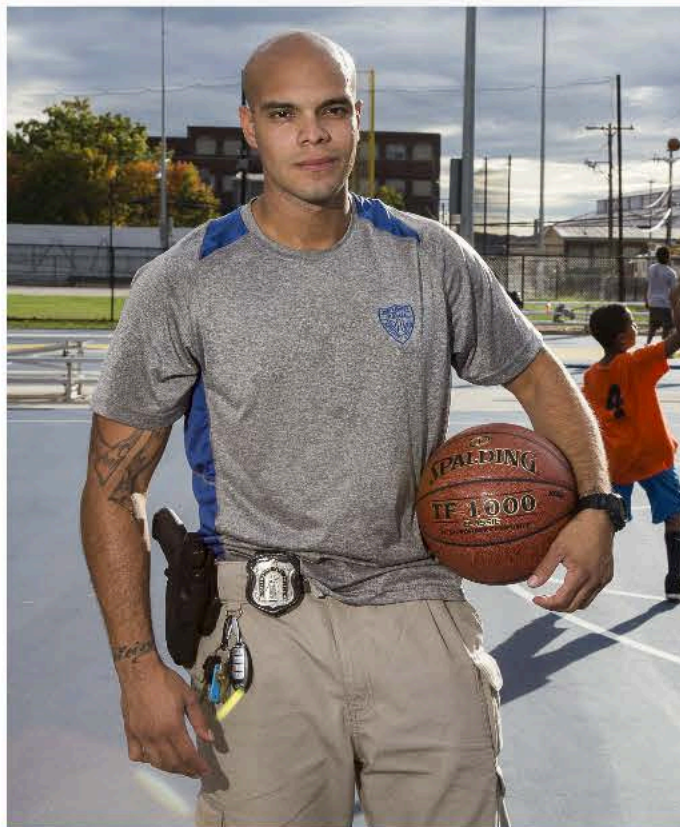
By Derek Torrellas

First in a series to revitalize Waterbury

Every day, Adrian Sanchez hopped over the fence into Waterbury's Rivera-Hughes Park to play basketball. One evening in 1997 – Sanchez was ten – police officer Willie Ramos Sr. strolled into the park in uniform. Sanchez remembers it being intimidating, initially, until Ramos shot a couple baskets with the kids. There was a basketball league they could play in, Ramos told them, if they joined the Police Activity League, known as PAL. Sanchez signed up the next day.

A few years later, over a mile away in the Division Street neighborhood of Waterbury, Fernando Spagnolo, a vice squad detective at the time, raided a house on St. Paul Street. "We retrieved 4 assault rifles, and a kilo of heroine," Spagnolo, currently PAL President, says, sitting in the Division Street office of what is now PAL's main building. The house raided almost 15 years ago, coincidentally, now faces the parking lot of PAL.

Sanchez, after years of playing basketball in PAL's league, became a city police officer. He came full circle with PAL when he was recently assigned there as a coordinator. Division Street,



Officer Adrian Sanchez, assigned to PAL as a coordinator, at the basketball courts in the PAL Park, as several games go on behind him. The Waterbury native was involved with the Police Activity League as a boy, but long before the new complex at Division Street was completed.

full of blighted property and roaming dogs underwent something of a transformation, beginning when PAL moved in and called the area home.

The effort was one of time, money, and involvement from the city and community.

PAL, in the meantime, has been steadily growing in enrollment and activities while the Division Street neighborhood changes around it. The two stories have been intertwined since 2004.

The Waterbury PAL, called Police Athletic League at the time, was formed in 1966 by four policemen and a \$1,500 donation. The organization gradually became one of competitive athletic programs, though it was essentially just basketball, baseball, and boxing, Spagnolo says. While usually numbering in the hundreds, youth membership dwindled to 70 by 2000. Officer Ramos, who recruited Sanchez, led PAL before the reorganization in 2004. According to Spagnolo, Ramos did the best he could with the resources provided to him by the city, but the funds didn't amount to much. Financial mismanagement of city funds in the 1980s and 1990s led to the inevitable; Waterbury was bankrupt in 2001. It wasn't an ideal situation for the PAL, reliant upon money from the city budget.

"When Chief (Neil) O'Leary, now Mayor O'Leary, took over as police

chief in 2004," Spagnolo says, "the first thing we did was take a look at the Police Activity League as a component to help engage ourselves deeper into the community." O'Leary wanted to make PAL "An arm of community relations," of the police. Focus would also be broadened beyond athletics to include academic programs.

The target demographic for the reorganized PAL was the at-risk youth. The young athletes who play sports year round already have an outlet, so it is the kids who return home from school with little to no parental supervision that the program wants.

"What about the kid that gets home, and grandma is 78 and in a wheelchair?" Spagnolo says.

With PAL as a tool of community-oriented policing, the focus is building a relationship with the kids as they grow into adults. The adults may have lost faith in police, but officers can start fresh with the children.

One of the most important steps to take was divorcing PAL from ownership by the police department. No longer subject to the whims of the city's budget, Waterbury PAL was quickly incorporated as a 501(c)3 – a charitable organization – and embarked on a quest for funding.

The Waterbury Police Department and PAL still maintain a de facto association, of course. Five officers are assigned to PAL as their full-time duty. They trade dark blue uniforms for khaki pants and athletic shirts adorned with the PAL logo, but the pistol belt and badge remain on their hip. They are still police officers, after all.

Officer Chris Amatruda is the current PAL officer in charge.

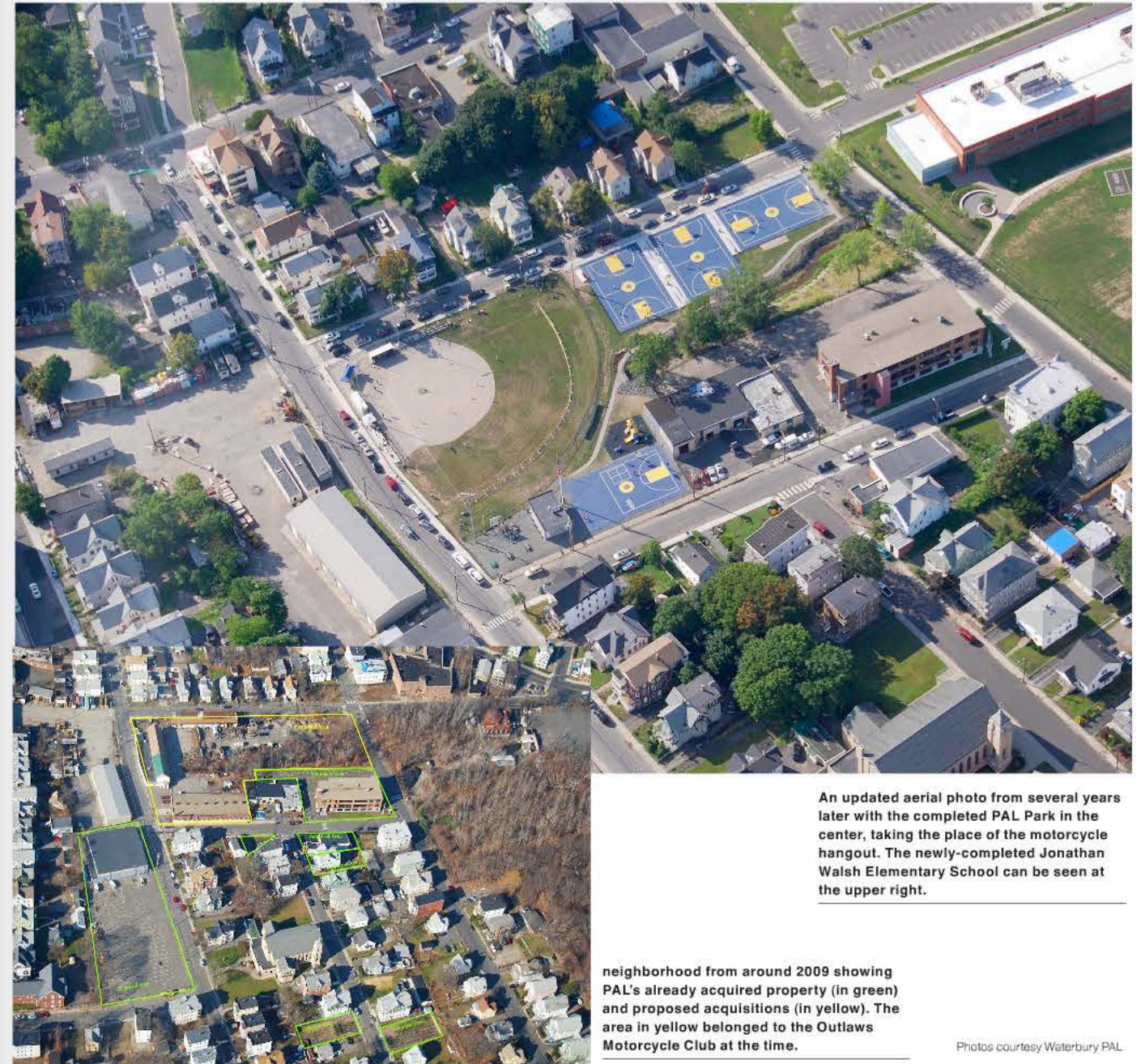
"Back in 2006, I started coaching (at PAL). I was a patrolman back then," says Amatruda. When the revival of PAL was still underway, he put in a request to transfer to the organization full-time. Being able to positively influence kids is what motivated Amatruda

to work at PAL as an officer, and he says the passion for the role that has kept him there for eight years. "Just seeing the whole change, and seeing what we've done over the last eight years, I wouldn't want any other position in the Police Department right now."

PAL's primary sources of funds are grants and corporate sponsorships. In January 2007, the police officers started contributions by way of deductions from their weekly paychecks. It was the idea of then-Chief O'Leary, Spagnolo says, and according to him, nearly 95 percent of Waterbury police donate, whether it's \$1 or \$20 a week.

Waterbury's educators soon got on board with similar paycheck contributions to PAL. Spagnolo estimates that 30 to 40 percent of the city's teachers participate. The teachers are more than just income for PAL, though. They form the third part of a link between themselves, the police, and the youth.

Chrissy LaVallee sees the impact that PAL can have on the children that enter into her classroom at Walsh



An updated aerial photo from several years later with the completed PAL Park in the center, taking the place of the motorcycle hangout. The newly-completed Jonathan Walsh Elementary School can be seen at the upper right.

neighborhood from around 2009 showing PAL's already acquired property (in green) and proposed acquisitions (in yellow). The area in yellow belonged to the Outlaws Motorcycle Club at the time.

Photos courtesy Waterbury PAL

The trio of teacher Chrissy LaVallee, Deputy Police Chief Fernando Spagnolo, PAL President, and Officer Chris Amatruda, PAL officer in charge, discuss introducing a new empowerment program into the existing Homework Haven.



Elementary School. The Social Studies and Writing teacher is involved in the Homework Haven program, geared toward students with chronic difficulty in completing their homework. "It's easier when you're sitting right there with them," LaVallee says, "they don't feel like they're in it alone. They know that if they come across something they can't do, you're right there to help them."

Teachers also assist PAL by identifying who the at-risk youth might be.

"It was a good marriage -- the Police Activity League and the education department," Spagnolo says. "Because our commitment to them was almost immediate intervention. So, if they had a problem with a troubled youth and there was no other avenue for them to go to with this kid, we vowed and promised them that within 24 hours we'd have a PAL coordinator in the classroom or at the kid's home. And we would do the best we could to try to intervene and get services for the family and that youth."

PAL's move to Division Street was prompted by a swelling number of young members. "We grew rapidly," Spagnolo says. "We had 83 kids when we took the program over. Within the first year, we went to 1,800." A larger place was needed for not only the number of kids they now had, but for future growth as well. "Chief O'Leary, at that time, calls me up one day and says 'We're going to take a ride.'"

A local businessman, Fritz Blasius of Blasius Chevrolet Cadillac, had been in communication with O'Leary about where to house PAL. Spagnolo and Chief O'Leary went to look at a Catholic school and a recreation center on Division Street, based on a sugges-

tion from Blasius. The school and recreation center belonged to nearby St. Lucy's Church, but had been shuttered for about five years. Blasius helped broker the deal for PAL to purchase the property from the Archdiocese of Hartford.

The Outlaws Motorcycle Club, which the State of Connecticut identifies as an outlaw motorcycle gang, leased a large plot of land adjacent to the new PAL property for many years. It was a strange relationship, then, when the Police Activity League became their landlords after expanding and buying the Outlaw's lot. Stranger still, Spagnolo says, the bikers asked PAL to renew their lease. Inevitably, the motorcycle club was kicked out, but not after a month of paying rent to the organization spun off from the Police Department. The old Outlaw's land is now the PAL Park, complete with a baseball field and no fewer than four basketball courts, conspicuous in the bright blue and yellow paint of PAL's colors.

In the past, Division Street was notable for a negative image. "This zip code would be the location of the most violent crime in the city," says Spagnolo, citing two homicides at the Outlaws Motorcycle Club hangout, and the raid mentioned earlier in the story. "This was an area, that, as a young patrolman in the early '90s, I worked quite frequently. It was a tough neighborhood. There was a lot of gun play, a lot of drug activity, and a lot of blighted property." Homeless took to the vacant homes for shelter, dice-throwing games could be found on almost any corner. Spagnolo also recalls a 1992 foot pursuit after a murder that ended right in what is now PAL's backyard.

The most important trigger for the neighborhood's change, was money. It wasn't a slow trickle, either, more like the opening of a floodgate.

"We infused a million bucks into this neighborhood in about 18 months," Spagnolo says. He calls it the "catalyst," because once PAL starting buying the properties and cleaning them up, landlords and homeowners reacted. Vacant and blighted properties began to sell or were improved.

"The inordinate amount of police presence helps too," he says.

A recent addition to the neighborhood was the construction of Jonathan Reed Elementary School in 2013. Bill Slowinski, who works at the school and lives not far from Division Street, says the area used to be "dumpy and run down," littered with trash and tires. In particular, he notes that the lot where people threw their junk was cleaned up and turned into basketball courts during the process.

Down the street, a man in his early 20s was more careful to give any praise. The man, who preferred not to be named, says it is both good and bad for the neighborhood to have the PAL park. It boiled down to the simple equation that more people equals more problems, when dozens of teens and young adults flock to the park. It is especially true for close-knit communities in Waterbury. "You see someone not from here," he says, "it's going to bring some kind of suspicion."

On a quiet weekday afternoon, Xyshawn Punter was shooting a basketball in the empty indoor PAL gymnasium. The 11-year-old lives in the neighborhood, so he often goes there after school as a way to stay active outside the house. Aside from participat-

ing in flag football, which he chose over the basketball league, Xyshawn goes to one of PAL's homework help programs. Though he's more of an assistant there, really. "I already did my homework," Xyshawn says. "I was helping the other kids."

Sanchez reflected on his own time as a young member of PAL and a basketball player. "PAL would just extend me staying out of trouble in any type of way. We'd have our games, we'd have our practices; those were always pretty late. That's pretty much how I grew up to be straightforward," he says.

As a Hispanic boy growing up in a neighborhood that he says had gang violence, Sanchez looked up to Officer Ramos as a role model. It was Ramos' son, also named Willie, who influenced Sanchez to become a police officer himself.

Sanchez remembers a day when Willie Ramos Jr. and his partner parked their car near where Sanchez and his friends were playing a game of basketball. Ramos' first words were, "Hey listen, we have next," Sanchez says, and an impromptu game of 3-on-3 began with the two cops. "I just remember saying to myself after that game, 'Wow this is cool, a young Hispanic cop finds time to actually park while on duty and come play ball with us and interact with us.'"

Today, the Waterbury PAL boasts an enrollment of 4,327 total youths, roughly divided as 80 percent males and 20 percent females. Research backs up a lot of what Spagnolo and Amatruda say about PAL's influence. In 2009, the Institute for the Study of Crime and Justice at Central Connecticut State University conducted a study comparing students enrolled in the Waterbury PAL with a similar number of students from Waterbury who are not part of the program. The conclusion was that PAL decreases instances of trouble at home, trouble at school, trouble with other youths, and trouble with the police.

Not long after Sanchez reflected on his memory of playing a spontaneous basketball game with Officer Ramos Junior, he walked over to the courts on PAL's park. Ostensibly just for a photograph on the court, Sanchez soon found himself immersed in a 2-on-2 game with a few teenagers. On the short walk back to the PAL building, still sweating from the game, he managed to mediate a dispute between several pre-teens involving a possible fight and found out who broke a window on a PAL school bus.

It's possible, then, that a few decades from now, someone might talk about the time they met Officer Sanchez on the PAL basketball court on Division Street and how it influenced them to do something in the community.