

## Bridging the Gap: The Police Officer Who Leads with Love, Empathy and Respect

*This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.*

### Lesson Goals

Help students...

- understand the reasons some people have negative perceptions of the police but also the role and importance of the police in our communities.
- consider how building relationships within a community and finding common ground with others can solve problems.
- see the value of empathy in entering into other people's situations, trying to understand their perspectives, beliefs and opinions.
- recognize each person as an individual and refrain from unfair judgements based in part on their identity within a group.
- be inspired to identify problems in their lives and how they can work towards solutions
- appreciate the courage it takes to be honest with ourselves and our peers when we have done something wrong.

### Highlighted Virtues / Character Traits

**Courage:** the capacity to meet difficult situations without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one's convictions; to be willing to put one's opinions into practice.

**Duty:** something that one is expected or required to do according to one's own standards; duty can also come from what is expected of us as citizens of our local community, nation and other communities.

**Empathy:** trying to understand another person's situation, entering into the feeling or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation.

**Honesty:** truthfulness; free from deceit or fraud; being honest requires integrity and often courage to overcome the fear of a failure such as not doing well on a test, or being looked down on by our peers.

**Respect for Others:** showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of others; living by "the golden rule" - do unto others as you would want done unto you

**Tolerance:** realizing and appreciating that everyone has a right to different beliefs and opinions—as long as those beliefs and opinions do not cause harm to others.

### Leader Introduction:

As a young man, Ryan Tillman experienced unfair policing and stereotyping. But instead of just complaining and not doing anything about it, Tillman decided to become a police officer to improve the relationship between his community and the police. As a police officer, Tillman started a group named "Breaking Barriers United" with the goals to 1) change the way police officers view and interact with the community they serve and 2) to change how the community views the police. Let's watch Tillman's story.

## Lesson Videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ujqZLoqzFM>

## Leader Summary:

As a black police officer, Ryan Tillman is in a unique position to inspire positive change, and he does that by bridging the gap between the police and his community. Each of us influences and plays a role in the lives of the people around us. Let's discuss Officer Tillman's story and consider how his example can apply to our own lives in enacting positive change among our friends, family and community.

## Discussion Question Options: *(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses)*

Before beginning our discussion, let's read over the virtues and their definitions, found in the online lesson as a separate document.

1. As a young man, Officer Tillman did not like police officers. He said, "It was really damaging to have my first interaction with a police officer be negative." Why did Tillman choose to become a police officer anyways and how did that inspire Breaking Barriers United's mission?  
*(He thought he could be good at it and needed to provide for his wife and son. He realized after joining the police academy that there needed to be more education and understanding on both sides, from law enforcement, to the community they serve, and from the community to the police. Tillman developed a passion, "his why", for bridging the gap between the police and communities they serve.)*
2. What virtue from our list does Tillman have as a result of his negative experience with the police and now working as a police officer ?  
*(Tillman is able to have **empathy** for others who have been treated poorly by the police and now also for police officers and the difficult situations and dangers they face.)*
3. What is officer Tillman personally doing to make a positive change in his community and to help change the way his community views the police?  
*(Tillman makes a daily effort to get to know the members of the community he serves and to develop trusting relationships with them as "Ryan" before they get to know him as only a police officer. He said he can't just arrest people, bring them to jail and just go home everyday. He does community outreach and seminars so that the police and community members can better understand each other's perspectives and come to see each other as individuals, not just stereotype each other as a group.)*
4. When Officer Tillman saw a problem in his community regarding police, he made it his **duty** to find a solution. He said "We all need to turn the microscope on ourselves and say what can I do better [to solve this problem]?" and, "We have to be willing to hear one another out... so that we can be a better community together." How do these quotes and his organization's actions prove that Tillman is living out and promoting **tolerance** and **respect for others**?  
*(Tillman's seminars promote tolerance by giving members of the community and the police a constructive environment to state their views on police practices and the perspective of police officers. In his seminars, both sides are likely presented with views that may be hard to hear but the essence of tolerance is to truly listen to the views of others and respect the rights of others to state their views, as long as they aren't advocating harm to others.*  
  
*Tillman promotes respect for others by giving the community and police an opportunity to see the other side as individuals who each have value and not just a collective group. Tillman also lives out respect for others in the way he forms relationships with individual members of the community he serves.)*

5. What problems or issues do we see in our school or community where a seminar type setting could be helpful where we have an open and respectful exchange of ideas on the issue?

Do you think having respectful discussions, where both sides are able to state their views and to treat each other with respect, increases the chance of successfully resolving disagreements or achieving a compromise? If yes, why?

(When we listen to each other with respect, we must put our own emotions and opinions aside to better understand what others believe and how they feel. By having true empathy, we can learn a lot from others perspectives, and have a better chance at solving the issues at hand.)

7. Officer Tillman said, "We need the community to be able to see the human behind the badge and realize that our profession is a noble and heroic one...but it's up to us [police officers] to open their eyes." How easy or hard is it for us to view a police officer we see in our community as an individual and not just "the Police"?

Let's list and talk about the **duties** and responsibilities of police in our community.  
(protecting individuals lives and health from violence, natural disasters and other threats; protecting property from damage and theft; enforcing traffic and other common laws; responding to emergency calls from members of our community; investigating crimes; apprehending offenders of crimes)

Do you think these roles involve a level of personal danger for the police, and having discussed everything the police are responsible for in our community, does this change how you view individual police officers?

8. Do you see any issues with how the police interact with members of our community? If yes, let's discuss them.

If there are issues with the police in your community then... "Do you think it would be good to have a seminar similar to what Officer Tillman organizes to discuss these issues?"

9. Do you think within our school and among our peers that we have an issue of not viewing others as individuals and instead stereotyping people as members of various groups and assuming they're all the same? If yes, what are some of the groups we do this with?

What can we do to make an effort to get to know others individually who are not members of our own groups?

10. Let's talk about some examples in our own lives where we had a negative relationship with someone and were able to heal through talking it out and trying to be **empathetic**? (also a **journal writing activity below**)

11. Officer Tillman is quick to be **honest**, in a very respectful way, when police officers make mistakes. Is his honesty and **respect for others** important to establish trust between him and the community?

Let's talk about some examples of when we had the courage to be honest with others (it could be calling someone out for bullying others or telling someone when they mistreated you.)

Can you also share some examples of when you had to own up to a mistake that you made?

### Journal Writing Options

1. Have you ever had a negative relationship with someone in your life that you were able to heal through talking, trying to be more **empathetic** and maybe even finding common ground? Write about your experience, including your feelings towards that person before and after, and how you were able to make the change.
2. Officer Tillman said, “Instead of just looking at what someone else can do better, we all need to turn the microscope on ourselves and ask what can I do better.” After taking some time to think it through, write about one way you can do better in an important aspect of your life.

### Extended Activity:

1. Pair students in groups of 2-3. Remind students that Ryan’s video ended with a challenge: “lead with love, lead with empathy, and lead with respect. That’s how we change our country.” Have students brainstorm a list of problems in their own lives that they can try to solve through love, empathy, and respect. It could be about disagreeing with a sibling/friend, someone picking on others at school, facing peer pressure to do something they know is wrong, or a problem within our larger community. Each team will pick one of the problems from their list and then illustrate through a presentation or skit how they can positively address the problem.
2. Invite members of your local police department to come in and have a seminar with your students where they can talk about their work, including their personal “whys” for the work they do, their goals and duties, and to also give the students an opportunity to talk about how they view the police, including any concerns they may have.

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