

Sheriff Mike Chitwood said all the Spanish he can - Daytona Beach News-Journal, The (FL) - March 2, 2019 - page A11

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Sheriff Mike Chitwood said all the Spanish he can speak is “buenas tardes” and “muchas gracias” but that’s enough of an ice breaker to bring his agency closer with Northwest Volusia’s Mexican community, which recognized the sheriff for improving relations.

“I was humbled and honored to receive the award and I don’t know why they chose me,” Chitwood said this week, holding his certificate of appreciation for his contributions to the community that includes migrants and farm workers.

Marcos Crisanto, coordinator of the Farmworker Association of Florida’s office in Pierson, is quick to answer.

“It’s because of his involvement with the community,” Crisanto said. “He has been very visible in our community since he became sheriff and people are grateful of his support.”

In the two years that Chitwood has been sheriff, Crisanto said he has received positive feedback from residents about his deputies.

There are fewer complaints of profiling by deputies, who used to park their patrol cars where undocumented workers are known to be, then pull them over, Crisanto said, and not always for a good reason. Deputies are now stopping people for traffic violations and unsafe vehicles, he said.

In March 2017, shortly after he took over as sheriff, Chitwood met with the migrant community to outline his policing plan.

At the San Jose Catholic Mission in Pierson, Chitwood spoke then to more than 200 residents of the migrant worker community gathered at the sanctuary of the church. After listening to their stories and experiences with deputies before he took office, he promised fairness.

Chitwood reassured the Mexican community then that his deputies were not allowed to participate in immigration roundups or profiling, and they will protect victims and witnesses of crime regardless of their immigration status.

Chitwood also made it clear then that the law will be applied equally and fairly, as it is done with American citizens, on violent undocumented law-breakers. That promise elicited claps of approval from the migrants.

Nearly two years later, those guarantees are being seen in the community and that’s why Chitwood was recognized for his positive work, Crisanto said, offering some examples.

Chitwood has helped with Christmas toy giveaways to children in the Mexican community and has also contributed school supplies and backpacks to the Farmworker Association's back-to-school programs, Crisanto said.

Community members indeed feel they are being treated more fairly, the farm worker advocate said.

Deputy Hector Rodriguez, a DeLeon Springs native and a three-year patrol deputy who works the Northwest Volusia community, said that Chitwood's presence in the community does bring a level of comfort to the residents.

"I've seen that Sheriff Chitwood is more connected to the community," Rodriguez said, adding that Chitwood has also been able to do that with other Volusia communities.

Rodriguez said he believes that Chitwood's leadership style and his willingness to show up when the community needs issues addressed is what has made the Mexican community more receptive of the Sheriff's Office.

"You know, if the top leader of the agency goes out on patrol or meetings and sits and eats tacos with them, it makes a difference to the community," Rodriguez said. "Just showing up like that makes a difference."

'Palpable fear'

The news is good to Chitwood, who said he has always reminded his deputies working in Northwest Volusia, that they are in a community "where there is palpable fear of law enforcement."

"I know that I have a great group of deputies that work in the Pierson and Seville area," he said. "And all I preach to them is be fair. Enforce the law fairly."

But Chitwood reiterated that if a person breaks the law or commits a crime, his or her immigration status will not matter: "We are coming to get you."

Chitwood's approach to policing in the migrant community has made the community less fearful and more understanding of the work deputies do, Crisanto said.

"He has come to church with us. He has eaten with us," Crisanto said. "He is not afraid of being criticized and is willing to listen to people, even if they have very difficult questions."

For instance, Chitwood did not avoid being questioned when the community demanded answers after deputy Brandon Watson shot and killed **Emmanuel Alquisiras** during a domestic violence call in Seville on Aug. 3, Crisanto said.

There was suspicion in the community that Watson's actions were extreme with Alquisiras because he was Mexican. Chitwood accepted an invitation to Mass at the San Jose Catholic Mission and

after the service spoke to more than 200 people who had stinging questions and criticisms, Crisanto said.

"And he did answer all the questions," Crisanto said. "Not 100 percent of the people were satisfied with his answers but the majority understood the situation better."

Chitwood said Crisanto helped greatly in easing fears after the shooting because he gave him an opportunity to speak with the people. The meeting at the church allowed people to ask any questions that they wanted to ask and a lot of misinformation was cleared up, Chitwood said.

Some of the questions focused on why the deputy had to shoot Alquisiras, who was on the ground unarmed. Others asked why he wasn't shot in the hand instead of the body and why the deputy's backup was so far away.

Alquisiras was shot seven times, an investigation shows.

"I think we had the opportunity to say, 'You don't have to agree with this but we are going to at least tell you what happened and you can form your own opinion,' " Chitwood said of the meeting. "I think the folks understood that maybe things could have been handled a little differently but they saw why."

Following the shooting incident in Seville, Chitwood said he has taken steps to ease the community's fears and has ordered that a second deputy must be assigned each shift to the rural areas of Northwest Volusia.

Deputies assigned to Seville or Pierson get notifications from dispatch as to how far away (in miles) from back up they are," Chitwood said. "Also, I put in an order that two deputies must be in the area at all times."

If for some reason someone leaves the area, a sergeant or another deputy must fill the slot, the sheriff said.

Chitwood said his agency will continue to work to be part of the communities it covers.

"There is crime there, there is domestic violence issues, there are drug issues," Chitwood said. "We need to know that and if we alienate the community they are not going to tell us who is bringing in the drugs or who doesn't belong in the community."