

Program prepares men to fill voids in boys' lives

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
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Men make vow to help young boys after completing intensive training program

As they sat in bright yellow and orange chairs, more than a dozen men got a crash course in Mentoring 101.

The men were schooled on the art of being an adult mentor in a basement classroom at the Best Choice Center Monday evening. They took notes, asked questions and held lively discussions on relevant subjects, attempting to soak in as much as they possibly could.

Mere weeks from now, the men will have to put their lessons to practical use; they'll be shadowed for at least a year by young, impressionable boys, many of whom have never had a male presence in their lives.

The mentors wrapped up their training Monday and graduated into the ranks of the five-year-old Mentoring for Success program. The program was begun after the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services lobbied the General Assembly for funds to initiate a statewide adult mentoring program aimed at curbing juvenile violence, drug use and dropout rates.

The Best Choice Center has been a site for the program from the beginning. It was chosen in 1994 as one of five demonstration sites in the state.

"Our goal is to match as many young African American males with African American (men) as possible," said Dorothy Graham-Wheeler, director of BCC and project administrator for the mentoring program.

Graham-Wheeler said male mentors must be stable and upstanding citizens. Although many of the mentors are professionals, the program does not discriminate.

"Our mentors come from all walks of life ... police officers, firemen, laymen, pastors," Graham-Wheeler said. It varies by individual, but, on average, mentors are asked to spend a couple of hours with their mentees - the term used for the boys in the pro-

gram - twice each month. Mentees range in age from 8 to 15.

Mentors are vigorously recruited, Graham-Wheeler said. They are scouted out at social functions, churches and universities. The group of men that just finished the mentor training are all members of the Psi Phi Chapter of Omega Psi Phi fraternity.

They range in ages from 25 to 77. Some have children of their own at home; others have children who have long since moved out and started their own families. In addition to sleek certificates of completion, the new mentors received profile packages of their mentees, listing their hobbies, ages and family information.

The mentors' first order of business is to make contact with their mentees right away, said Bill Riddick, state facilitator for the program and longtime mentor. Riddick travels the state teaching prospective mentors the dos and don'ts of the job.

His students say Riddick's informal lessons are always spirited - jam-packed with serious and hysterical episodes from his more than a decade of mentoring.

On this night, Riddick encouraged the men to broaden their mentees' minds through theater, concerts and other cultural activities. He also told the men to take active roles in the mentees' studies. Some mentors have even visited their mentee's schools for conferences with teachers and principals.

"If children are not successful in school, they are not going to be successful as your mentee," Riddick said, motioning to a small chalk board with the names of the men's mentees scrolled down it.

Riddick told the men that the time they spend with their mentees will have a long-lasting effect on the youngsters. An adult

mentor has been the shot in the arm that many young people have needed to turn their lives around, Riddick said.

"All the kids who have been mentored have done well - all of them!" Riddick said.

"When you look at the statistics from around the state, they are outstanding."

The new mentors said they could have been doing other things - especially in the midst of the Major League Baseball playoffs - but they expressed their desire to give back to a community that fostered their success and to give young people the same opportunities adults gave them as children.

"If I can't take time to help someone, then my living would be in vain," said Clark Hanner, who works for American Express.

Hanner, who has a son of his own, says he is not fretting over his initial meeting with his mentee, although he knows that it will be an everyday learning process and that he may stumble along the way.

"If you mentor the way you live everything should be all right," he said.

At 77, Henry Jones Jr. is the oldest in the new mentor class. An active retiree, Jones spent the better part of his life working for the school system as a teacher, coach and eventually an administrator.

"Anything that I can do to help young black children, I'll do it," Jones said, giving his reason for getting involved in the program. Jones doesn't want his age to be a factor in his mentoring duties, though he admits that it may cause some apprehension with his mentee at first.

But Jones is not expecting any major obstacles; he points to his 40-plus years working with youngsters in the schools as his best qualification.



Clark Hanner, right, a first-time mentor, talks with a veteran mentor after Monday's training class.



Bill Riddick teaches the art of mentoring to a group of volunteers during a class Monday at the Best Choice Center. Riddick leads such classes at sites throughout the state.

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