



## HOUSTON CHRONICLE ARCHIVES

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### **ENRICHING YOUNG LIVES / Program helps guide youths / The mission: Reducing crime, teen pregnancy and drug use**

*By KIM HUGHES, HOUSTON CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT*

SINCE its founding 23 years ago, the Fifth **Ward Enrichment Program** has graduated thousands of young men from its youth leadership and development program.

Founder and Chief Executive Officer Ernest McMillan said that while the **program** has grown, the mission has always been the same: to reduce the rates of teenage pregnancy, crime, drug use and high school dropouts.

"Teen pregnancy rates nationally have slowed down in the Latino and African American community," McMillan said.

"One of the secrets of success there is to talk to them about abstinence, and control their desire for immediate gratification.

"Also the HIV/AIDS scare has gotten more people involved."

McMillan said 100 percent of young men who have been through the **enrichment program** graduated from high school, based on his statistics during the past 10 years.

Fifty percent went on to college, and the other 50 percent into the work world.

The program is financed through public and private donations, individuals and corporations, as well as government sources and private foundations such as the Houston Endowment, and corporate support and fundraisers.

It operates on about \$800,000 a year.

"We had been looking at a school dropout rate of 60 percent in the general school population when we first started," McMillan said. "By 1991 we saw 84 percent of our young men were graduating. We knew then we were onto something, and that mentoring does make a difference."

During the school year, the **program** operates out of four Fifth Ward area schools: E.O. Smith Education Center, 1701 Bringham; Fleming Middle School, 4910 Collingsworth; Jordan High School for Careers, 5800 Eastex Freeway; and Wheatley High School, 4900 Market St.

McMillan said each campus has an **enrichment** team with a site coordinator, a health educator, mental health therapists, a peer mentor and a family liaison for home visits.

During the summer, the **program** operates out of the Fifth Ward Missionary Baptist Church, 4300 Noble.

After school and on weekends, young men can go to the Teen Enterprise Center at 3300 Lyons Ave.

The 2,500-square-foot Enterprise Center has hands-on activities in computer refurbishing, filmmaking, bicycle repair, art and photography.

Frank Richardson, lead manager and director of school projects, said there is a community service component to the program.

"The kids go out and find different service projects," Richardson said. "Targeting hunger, sorting medical supplies being delivered to different countries, cleaning up vacant lots or graffiti at schools.

"Community service is important because it gives the kids a chance to give back to their community and see they can make a difference."

**Benson Tillman**, 25, is a **graduate of the program**, and now he sits on the board of directors.

"I lived with my mother most of the time, and she had three boys to take care of and she was working," Tillman said.

"So, instead of being cooped up in the house, I took the opportunity to go through self-development classes. After I got in the program, I liked what I saw. I learned a lot about discipline, self-respect and respect for others."