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Enriching Their Lives/Program Funded By United Way Helps Boys Overcome Obstacles

By LYDIA LUM

Donell Smith remembers the naivete that caused him to flunk sixth grade.

After managing to pass his classes every previous year, he had quit studying and spent all his spare time playing sports in the gym with his friends. Although his uncle -who lived with him, his twin sister and mother in a modest Fifth Ward house - encouraged him to study, he paid little attention.

But when report cards came out, he cried.

"I thought I was the head man," Smith recalled. "My uncle laid

down a few rules, but I didn't listen much because he wasn't my father. I didn't think I needed to study until I had to go back to sixth grade and my friends went (to seventh grade) without me. That hurt."

While repeating the sixth grade, he joined the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program - something his friends had mentioned as an enjoyable after-school activity.

After participating in the program for seven years and winning an academic college scholarship, Smith now volunteers as a mentor in the program. He credits it for steering him toward school and work.

Founded in May 1984, the enrichment program promotes the positive social, academic and emotional development of boys at several inner-city schools.

It is one of the more than 250 programs that receives United Way funding in Harris, Fort Bend, Montgomery and Waller counties. It is overseen by Community Partners, a \$1.5 million agency that serves thousands of Houstonians annually.

In 1994, the United Way allocated more than \$53,000 to the enrichment program.

Over a decade's time, the program has blossomed to include field trips, academic guidance, parent-child social activities, interpersonal skills lessons, health and nutrition tips, drug prevention counseling and social service referrals.

This fall, 170 boys ages 10 to 17 are participating in the program, which is free if applications are approved. All of the boys live and attend school in the Fifth Ward.

Many African-American boys in the Fifth Ward, like Smith, grow up without fathers and often are particularly vulnerable to drugs, gangs and violence, said program director Ernest McMillan.

The Fifth Ward, one of Houston's poorest areas, has the city's highest rates of child abuse, infant mortality and teen pregnancy, according to Community Partners. More than half of the 65,000 residents are under age 19.

"I didn't have much of a father," Smith said. "I loved my uncle, and a couple of times he whipped me when I deserved it. But he didn't discipline me much, didn't even tell me what time I had to be in bed, so I kind of did what I wanted."

Staff members of the enrichment program often walk the youths home to gain their confidence as well as to build rapport with families, he said.

After-school activities include a chess club, martial arts, filmmaking, T-shirt printing and business education. Some of those activities teach the youth about working for a living.

For instance, a computer repair and recycling course at Wheatley High School allows the boys to fix up old and damaged hardware donated by local companies, then sell the systems for a small profit.

Smith recalls how peddling souvenirs for a commission at Astros baseball games taught him sales tactics.

"It was tough getting people's attention long enough to get them to buy something," said Smith, now a University of Houston freshman who's considering a management career.

"I finally started singing songs to get customers," he said. "I'd tell jokes, talk, anything to get attention."

McMillan estimates that more than 1,000 boys have participated in the program since its inception. A survey indicates that of the 500 boys who completed the program between 1984 and 1991, more than 87 percent graduated from high school and entered college or a trade school, McMillan said.

Some of those young people, such as Smith, have returned to work with the next generation of African-American boys.

Smith, now 20, juggles volunteering as a mentor with his UH classes and a food service job at a retirement home.

During mentoring sessions, "we talk about what's on their minds," said Smith. "There's a lot of hurt behind their little faces. Some of them have been abused and beat up at home.

"And there's stuff that they don't want to tell grown-ups. Some of them think that selling drugs is going to let them take care of themselves.

"Maybe we can convince them that's not true."

What contributions buy

Community Partners, a United Way agency, provides services for Fifth Ward residents.

\$5 will buy: Garden gloves and safety goggles for one boy for summer neighborhood cleanup projects.

\$25 will buy: Two hours of computer repair instruction for 10 boys.

\$50 will buy: An educational video on violence prevention and mediation techniques.