



HOUSTON CHRONICLE ARCHIVES

Paper: Houston Chronicle

Date: MON 11/10/2003

Section: Houston

Page: 1

Edition: 2 STAR

Program Tries to Show Teens the Right Path

By SALATHEIA BRYANT, Staff

For four days a week, after a long day at school, Travyon Tablin trades a spot in front of the tube for one behind a camera to learn about photography and life.

Before he started coming to the Teen Enterprise Center - an entrepreneurial skills-building program - the 13-year-old didn't know much about photography. He just took his film to Walgreens.

Now the teen has learned more than his share of lessons. In between lessons on photography, he's also heard the wisdom given by older men who want to guide him to do the right thing.

"When I get older, I will choose the right things to do in life," Tablin said.

The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program, which runs the center, has been guiding young boys like Tablin away from the lures of illegal cash, thug life and premature fatherhood for nearly 20 years. Its mission is to revitalize young lives, not giving up on even the toughest cases.

Here, being a role model and father-figure for boys at risk of becoming another negative statistic is their aim.

Men like Ernest McMillan, founder and chief executive officer, and Charles Savage, chief of operations, guide with a firm hand. They do not allow profanity, racial slurs, tardiness or fighting. They offer a safe haven and tough love.

And there are victories and setbacks.

Gerald Young, a 25-year-old alumnus of the program, came to Fifth Ward Enrichment for a summer job to earn money to buy school clothes. He was pulled in beyond that summer and now is an employee. Young credits the program with exposing him to possibilities and giving him role models to look up to, since his own father died when he was 9.

"They expanded your mind and made you think bigger," he said.

And other former participants credit the program's activities with saving them from another path.

Kevin Washington, 32, got involved while a student at E.O. Smith Middle School, where he had a habit of getting suspended or skipping school.

"I was headed down the wrong path. If I had not joined, I'd probably be locked up," said Washington, director of the teen center. "We were hanging out on the streets doing whatever came up, and a lot of times it ended up in trouble. They kept me on the straight and narrow."

Savage makes a good role model. He grew up in St. Louis at a time when neighbors looked after each other. But Savage said communal ownership has changed and some children don't have that support. So they teach young boys the importance of finishing school, shaking hands, appreciating others and solving problems.

"We're just doing the things that our fathers did for us. That our mothers did for us. A lot of kids from this area feed the prison system with zero tolerance at school and zero tolerance on the street," said Savage. "We do whatever it takes for them to be a good man. We expose them to everything we can."

The program has a \$1 million budget that comes from individual donations and government and private grants. It also gets financial support from the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast, whose annual fund-raising campaign runs through March 1.

As with any social-service agency, money is an issue. A year ago the organization eliminated its elementary-based program. And hopes to have its own building still haven't been realized.

The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program serves about 400 low-income, at-risk males ages 12 to 19, who attend schools in the Northeast District of the Houston Independent School District. It provides life-skills training, mentoring, tutoring and vocational preparation. The Teen Enterprise Center teaches basic business skills.

United Way applauds the agency for staying true to its mission of serving at-risk children in an area once dubbed the "bloody Fifth" because of the violent crimes there.

"They have taken on a community that has faced many challenges," said Ronnie Hagerty, director of community relations with the United Way. "This is a program that is in the heart of the community. It's building confidence in the young men within that community."

Sometimes the job is painful. Savage has been to court with youths who had been in the program. He's seen some go to jail or prison. Another life lost to the garbage can, he says.

McMillan has been to 22 funerals. Among the victims was a young father shot to death by the new boyfriend of an ex-lover. A well-liked honor-student athlete also was shot to death. The hanging death of another was ruled suspicious. Whenever they don't reach a child, the men wonder if they could have done more.

"We don't have a magic wand or a formula. We just don't give up on a kid," McMillan, a father and grandfather, said. "We will start where they are. It may be two steps forward and one step back. We do see things happening and it's a miracle, and it gives us hope."