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Program Targets Teens Headed Down the Wrong Path

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Vincent North was one decision away from becoming a negative statistic. Peter Williams made the wrong choice and became one.

North, 18, is trying to break the cycle of crime and violence that has gripped his family and countless others, endangering an entire generation of African-American men. Williams is trying to find his way back from a life of drugs and crime.

On May 19, North decided not to go with four friends to rob a low-level drug dealer. Instead, North went to check on a job to which he was referred by *Ernest McMillan*, director of the **Fifth Ward Enrichment Program**. North's friends killed the dealer during the robbery and were later caught by police. They were convicted and sent to prison. One is serving a life term, while the others will spend between five and 20 years behind bars.

Williams, 23, was arrested in 1990 after more than five years of criminal activity. He was the last man out of a car he and a group of friends hijacked and then crashed while running from authorities. He was the only man arrested. Williams served 2 1/2 years in prison and will be on parole until 1995.

North realizes he could just as easily be behind bars. "I believe that if I had not changed I would be right along with them," he said. "They told me they wanted to rob this boy because he was a drug dealer and had money. "They asked me to come with them, but I didn't," North said. "I was thinking at the time that if I went with them and they got caught, which they did, where would I be.

"I thank God that I wasn't in that situation. If I didn't have to go check on that job with Mister Mc I would have went with them and would probably be doing life right now," North said.

North's involvement with the **Fifth Ward Enrichment Program** has steered him away from the dangers of growing up in one of the city's most violent areas, McMillan said. Many African-American boys growing up in the Fifth Ward have no father to guide them, he said.

"He was wild in a sense when he first came to us," McMillan said. "He was not disciplined. He would play in classes, run up and down the hallways, be suspended from school or not go at all."

McMillan's program targets at-risk African-American males between 12 and 18 years old. The focus is to guide the boys through the turbulent teen years in which "statistically and realistically" many are lost to crime, drugs or murder.

"He was headed down the wrong path. I know a couple of those guys he was talking about and had he not been involved in our program he may have been out there with them," McMillan said.

North's first year in the **program** was rough, but the counselors stood by him, McMillan said. Now he is a peer counselor, helping new members. North faces many of the same problems afflicting hundreds of families in the Fifth Ward -- no father at home. A brother is in prison for murder and drug possession.

North is the man of the family and his mother and other family members rely on him. "I have a brother in jail and he writes and tells me he doesn't want me to be there," North said. "He wants me to stay here and take care of the family. My grandfather and grandmother are the closest people to me and they don't want to see me do the same thing my brother did. I don't want to let them down."

There were no programs for Williams -- at least none he knew about. Since the age of 12, he has dealt with a drug problem, served time in prison and faced death while trying to support his habit. "I was with the in crowd," Williams said while taking a break from a drug counseling session. "I got expelled from school several times and then just dropped out. I had heard about crack and I ran from it for a while, but the one time I used, (there) was something about it. I continued to use and couldn't stop." Drugs did not keep Williams from holding down a job, but he had nothing to show for it except a hunger for more narcotics.

Also, having a job didn't stop Williams from committing criminal acts. He and his friends stole cars, burglarized homes and businesses, anything to get money for drugs, Williams said. It caught up with him in 1990 in the car hijacking. He spent 2 1/2 years in prison on an auto theft and aggravated assault conviction.

"A lot of my money did go for my (drug) habit," Williams said. "It was for that high, but really I became addicted to the other high (stealing).

"When I was doing it, I thought that anytime now I'm going to do something I'll really regret," he said. "It never got to that point. I think I would have killed somebody and I would be sitting on death row or someone would kill me."

Drugs helped ease the fear of possibly being killed or caught while committing a crime, Williams said. Drugs and alcohol also helped Williams block the nightmares of being shot during a robbery, he said.

"I use to think that someone was going to beat me to the draw. Knock my gun out of my hands. It was real scary," Williams said.

After countless hours of soul-searching while in prison, Williams said, he realized he had to change. He thought he had kicked drugs since he had been clean for so long, but while his system was clean the desire remained.

"I'd always tell myself that I didn't need it, but that didn't work," Williams said. "I had to enter a drug counseling program as a stipulation for my release. I didn't want to come here. I wasn't doing it for me, I was doing it for someone else."

Williams went to counseling until he got a job and began to make a little money. Williams said he thought that working long hours and keeping busy was the only drug counseling he required.

"I stopped coming to the meetings. I thought I had it under control. I didn't have time to (expletive) up. Soon as I did have time it happened. I started using again," Williams said.

He said he confessed to his parole officer because he was afraid of getting caught and sent back to prison.

"I just looked at myself and said, 'I can't keep going on like this,' " Williams said. "I was afraid I would wind up back in prison or dead."

Unlike North, Williams didn't learn from mistakes made by other family members. One of Williams' brothers has yet to face his drug problem, he said.

Another served prison time and had a serious drug problem, he said. His brother quit after drugs nearly killed him, he said.

"I buy into the hype that we are an endangered species," Williams said of his generation of blacks. "We are killing ourselves behind dope and alcohol. I feel scared sometimes that I'll fall back.

"I'm on the road to returning," he said. "I know exactly where I want to be today. I want to be clean today and wake up tomorrow with a clear head, not a hangover. Not because my parole officer wants me to do it, but because I want to do it."