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Fifth Ward program enriching lives.

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When the United Way drew up what it called a "misery index" several years ago, the Fifth Ward dominated its top 10 list for the Greater Houston area.

Rated on such negative items as numbers of school dropouts, households headed by females, unemployment and poverty, the Fifth Ward handily captured -- perhaps to its discredit -- the third, fourth, fifth and 10th spots, respectively.

To hear Ernest McMillan, executive director of the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program, describe the situation on his home turf, the Fifth Ward is a portrait of the worst things that crack cocaine and an economic downturn have done to some Houston neighborhoods.

It is an area, east of downtown, still plagued by crack. It is an area where incomes are among Houston's lowest and high school graduates are far from common. In short, the Fifth Ward, though showing signs of rebounding economically, fits the definition of a "ghetto."

But as McMillan phrases it, the people his program tries to help may live in a ghetto, but they don't have to "live with the ghetto in them."

The aim of McMillan's Fifth Ward Enrichment program is to fill a gap that passers-by wouldn't spot on a drive through the area.

It is the lack of adult males living in the same homes as their children.

His present clientele is 200 or more young black and Hispanic males, ages 10 to 17, most of whom have no male role models -- especially not the right kinds of models.

"I'd say 85 percent of the boys in our program are from homes with a female head of household, and increasingly they are headed by grandmothers," he said. "They raise one generation and then get another one."



Steve Campbell / Chronicle
Colette Windom and her 12-year old son, Eric, participate in the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program.

Sometimes both the child's mother and father land in jail on crack charges. Sometimes the boys have no idea who their father is. Sometimes the father is around but has no interest in his children.



For many reasons, the boys are considered to be "high risk," meaning that if no one intervenes, they are likely to end up in jail on drug charges, join gangs, leave school, get neighborhood girls pregnant and end up permanently in menial jobs, and go on to father children doomed to grow up, similarly, with no male role models in their lives.

McMillian's program is aimed at getting more fathers involved with their children or, in the alternative, providing better male role models for youths -- for instance, the seven full-time college students who help the program.

Youths in the program interact with adult males two to three hours daily after school -- hours when, unsupervised, they might otherwise get into trouble -- and often on weekends. They hold camping retreats, drug awareness classes, behavior modification programs, field trips, martial arts classes and sports events. They also have psychotherapeutic services for youths and counseling for youths and families.

The adult males fill in as counselors, teachers, buddies, advisers, and surrogate brothers and parents, performing roles the youths would do without but for McMillan's program.

The program currently revolves around four Fifth Ward schools that the youths attend -- Crawford Elementary, E.O. Smith Educational Center, Fleming Middle School and Wheatley High School.

An analysis of 75 Wheatley High students mentored by the program workers in 1996-97 showed positive results. Of 18 seniors in the program, according to McMillan, all graduated, and 15 enrolled in colleges. Seventy-three percent of the overall group had year-end grade averages of "C" or better. Absenteeism, a major problem at Wheatley, was low among youths in McMillan's program.

At Fleming, where less than 80 percent of students advanced in grade in 1994, program workers put on a violence reduction program that, McMillan said, cut student-to-student violence by 57 percent. Called the Peaceful School Project, it identified "influential students" to mediate disputes and got parents involved in hallway patrol work.

Overall, the effort pleased Fleming principal Chet Smith a lot.

"They're really, really good," Smith said. "We're proud to be part of that program."

At present, the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program gets 19 percent of its \$450,000-a-year funding from the United Way, but McMillan is in search of more help. He is seeking \$1 million.

That way he can expand his effort from four Fifth Ward schools to eight.