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**GENTLEMEN,  
SHALL WE  
BEGIN AGAIN?**

*THE FIFTH WARD ENRICHMENT PROGRAM*

**GENTLEMEN SHALL WE BEGIN AGAIN?  
THE FIFTH WARD ENRICHMENT PROGRAM**

by Mary Lou Adams, Ph.D.

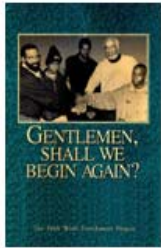
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**FOREWORD**

I remember my first visit to the Houston's Fifth Ward, a very poor, predominantly African-American neighborhood in Northeast Houston. I had been with the Hogg Foundation for a couple of years and had made many trips to Foundation-supported projects in the Houston area. But those trips had been to agencies located in stately old homes, (11 landscaped campuses, or in modern office buildings. None had been in the Fifth Ward. As I crossed I-10 and headed north into the neighborhood, I entered a very different Houston. There seemed to be almost no active businesses. Most of the buildings were unkempt--many were boarded up. Groups of men loitered on the street corners. I was relieved to leave the Fifth Ward later that day, but realized that for thousands of Houston children the Fifth Ward is home, and it is the place where they will grow up.

That was in the early 1980s, and the Foundation had just approved a multi-year grant to the Urban Affairs Corporation for an innovative program for teenage mothers. During the three years the Foundation supported this program, it recognized that teenage boys in the neighborhood desperately needed help, as well. The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program, one of the first in the nation for young black men, was developed by the Urban Affairs Corporation and began to provide that help in 1984. Program officers at Hogg working with this project believed that it was nationally significant and should be evaluated. Mary Lou Adams, an Evaluation Research Fellow at the Foundation, was completing her fellowship year and agreed to take on the job of evaluating the program. She soon began the first of many trips into the Fifth Ward to meet with staff and students and learn about the FWEP. In the following narrative, she describes the effort to bring hope to the boys growing up in the Fifth Ward.

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It is 3:40 p.m. and the halls of H. P. Carter Career Center are quiet. The four Fifth Ward project staff members are in the office finishing up last-minute details for the afternoon activities. Now they hear laughter and running feet as several of the participants race each other up the stairs to get to the FWEP offices first.

The boys burst into the room. The program director finishes his phone call to the director of the Shape Community Center. He has been discussing plans for the evening's community meeting. He turns to the ten or so youths who have just arrived and says, "Good afternoon, gentlemen." The boys giggle. One starts to complain that he has not received his points for morning tutorial. The program director says, "We'll take care of it after class." The academic specialist smiles and says, "D. R., you know why you did not get your points this morning. The boy hangs his head and looks sheepish. He says with a grin, "Oh, yeah, I forgot." Someone asks, "Hey, man, what did you do?" D. R. explains, "I didn't come prepared for class." By the time D. R. says, "Prepared" all of the boys in the room chime in to finish the sentence. "Oh well," he responds, "I'll have all my stuff next time."

The noise is very loud now as the boys laugh and talk. All four staff members stop what they are doing and simply stand still. The boys notice and are soon quiet. The director smiles and asks the boys, "Gentlemen, shall we begin again?" The boys laugh along with the staff. They then proceed in an orderly fashion to one of

the classrooms where roll is taken. Twenty-eight of thirty participants are present, and the youngsters begin their homework. Some explain that they have not been given homework assignments, and they are instructed to read.

Since it is Tuesday, after homework assistance is given, the boys have a life management seminar on decision making and conflict resolution. This class is led by a caseworker who discusses the best way to handle someone picking on you. The boys participate actively, each offering a solution. All solutions are listed on the blackboard, and the boys discount those that are unreasonable or will lead to confrontation.

At the end of this hour-long class, some of the boys get ready for the chess workshop, while others go into another classroom for the Business and Education Club. The boys in the chess workshop begin to tease and joke with the administrative assistant, "Hey, Mr. George, I hear we can beat you now." George laughs, "We'll see." In this workshop, groups of four boys play together, taking turns at the boards. The room becomes quiet now as the boys concentrate on their games.

The long-standing problems facing African-American male youth are reaching crisis proportions. The challenge is to find effective strategies to help these youths become productive and successful participants in society. Interventions are needed that not only prevent delinquency but change the societal context in which these children live.

The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program (FWEP) is such an intervention. This community-based, primary prevention program is designed to be a positive influence on males aged 11 to 14, most of whom live in female-headed households. FWEP was developed to address the special needs of these young men by instilling values, reaching skills, and guiding behavior in order to help them achieve responsible adulthood.

The program is unique in that all staff having contact with the boys are adult African-American males. The boys interact with these men daily for two to three hours after school and often on weekends. In the first decade of its operation, FWEP served more than 1,000 at-risk adolescent boys. During interactions with the boys, the staff may assume the role of teacher, friend, counselor, big brother, favorite uncle, or father.

The findings of two independent evaluations of the project have documented the program's success in helping boys achieve their goals. The results of the studies show that the interactions between the men and the boys are beneficial in positively changing attitudes and behavior, and they give promise of improving the potential for success of inner-city black youngsters. More important, the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program is a model that other communities can replicate.

by Mary Lou Adams, Ph.D.

## **The Problem**

Many scholars argue that the primary problem faced by inner-city, African-American boys is a lack of appropriate male-role socialization. Although these youngsters have many socializing agents and institutions, there is frequently too little opportunity for them to have sustained interactions with adult black males who are positive role models.

William Julius Wilson and other sociologists believe that the family is one of several institutions crucial to the welfare of society\* One of the traditional members of the family, the adult male, has become less and less visible in many poor inner-city communities. During the 1940s, 1950s, and the early part of the 1960s, black communities were characterized by a vertical integration of different segments of the urban black population. Lower-class, working-class, and middle-class families, while living in different neighborhoods, all lived in the same communities. All used the same recreational facilities and shopped in the same stores. Boys and girls interacted with groups of people within the mainstream, if not as members of their own families, then with those of their friends and neighbors. Moreover, the children of all three groups attended the same schools. The presence of middle- and working-class families provided stability to inner-city neighborhoods and reinforced and perpetuated mainstream patterns of norms and behavior.

Wilson suggests that today's loss of intact middle- and working-class families from traditional black communities has left those who remain in the inner city in a state of social isolation. As a result, many inner-city boys do not have the opportunity to witness normal male behavior. They do not get to see men go to work, play with their children, and interact appropriately with each other, their wives and daughters, and other women.

\*William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

The weakening of the institution of the family strikes at the central bonds that hold society together. Media accounts of misadventure in the inner city indicate that the boys are at high risk of becoming part of major social problems such as school dropout, teen parenting, drug abuse and crime. Reducing the problems faced by inner city youth will require community-based prevention.

## **A Pilot Project in Houston**

The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program began in June 1984 as a pilot project funded by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. FWEP is located in an economically distressed section in the northeast area of Houston. The boys in the program live in a community that is characterized by poverty, single-parent homes, high rates of unemployment and criminal activity, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, unresponsive schools, few after-school programs, and high dropout. The project was run initially by two full-time staff members in a building adjacent to a middle school from which the target population was drawn. Since that beginning, FWEP has expanded to include four schools (two middle and two elementary) and serves approximately 150 youngsters each year. With the expansion, FWEP moved into a more centrally located community facility.

The basic assumption of the Fifth Ward project is that the broad societal and community conditions under which children live have a profound effect on the kinds of adults that they become. Further, it holds that the behavior of youths has a major influence on the condition of their community. Boys who do not learn positive roles for adulthood soon contribute to the negative cycle as they participate in socializing a new generation of males. The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program initiated the process of "institution building," that is, restoring relationships that will strengthen one of society's most fundamental institutions, the family. Besides providing opportunities for young black males to interact with adult black men, FWEP has also developed activities that involve the parents and family, the school, and the community.

Both primary and secondary interventions are incorporated in the model. The program is a primary intervention in that it attempts to prevent the boys in the program from dropping out of school or becoming involved with drugs or with the juvenile justice system. The effort is a secondary preventive intervention because it attempts to identify and help, as early as possible, boys with disruptive attitudes and poor behavior. Moreover, the efforts of FWEPs staff members affect the community by influencing the behavior and the world view of the boys, their parents, and school.

## **Program Activities**

The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program combines many activities to achieve its goal of improving the "potential for success" of the boys. Overall, the program works at four levels:

(1) At the participant level, FWEP is designed to enhance the boys' self-esteem, to raise educational aspirations and attainment, and to reach life management and communication skills.

(2) At the family level, FWEP tries to improve parenting skills and foster empowerment.

(3) At the school level, FWEP aims at improving the social climate.

(4) At the community level, FWEP tries to create social networking for self-help aimed at improving neighborhood quality of life.

by Mary Lou Adams, Ph.D.

## **Participant Activities**

The program for the boys consists of three components. The first is academic and is designed to help participants acquire the skills that will allow them to complete high school. This phase of the program uses motivational techniques to encourage the boys to value learning, and activities are planned which help to make the learning process relevant, Culturally relevant spelling bees and creative writing projects on African-American themes are examples. Tutoring sessions are also conducted.

The therapeutic component of FWEP consists of weekly individual and group Counseling sessions provided by staff and a clinical psychologist. A behavior management system consisting of a token economy is also part of the therapeutic component. Points are awarded for accomplishing various tasks, and these can be converted into tokens redeemable for paper, pencils, records, tapes, candy, and other items. Through this token economy, the staff helps the boys to understand the consequences of their behavior. Rather than chastising a youngster for breaking the rules, the staff withholds points, placing the responsibility for behavior back on the boy's shoulders. Staff members are patient with the boys and do not raise their voices when unacceptable behavior is displayed. In essence, the boys learn to self-discipline.

The token economy also works ultimately to help boys learn to delay gratification as they save their points to buy more significant items rather than redeem those points for trivial items as soon as they are earned. Interviews with some of the boys indicate the token system is effective for motivation. As one boy said, "It helps me to get points and not to do things that will get me into trouble." Another boy stated it this way, "I really have to think about what I am going to do so that I don't lose points and then not be able to buy something from the store."

The enrichment component of FWEP supplements the other program aspects through a diverse range of cultural, educational, and recreational experiences. Field trips, arts and crafts, drama, chess, karate, camping trips, and organized sports are examples. The staff also provides classes in life management skills, including personal hygiene, human sexuality, the dangers of drugs, money management, and decision making.

The program's activities are divided into two phases during the year. In an eight-week summer phase, the boys attend Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. This phase provides the staff with the opportunity to determine the boys' needs, develop group cohesiveness, and establish rules and expectations for youngsters who will participate in the longer session that follows.

During the longer phase, which corresponds to the school year, the boys come together as a group after school for two and one half hours. They also meet on some Saturday and Sunday afternoons. In addition, participants have some weekday access to the staff during lunch and during the day since staff are frequently in the schools to provide counseling and lend support to the faculty.

## **Program Activities for the Parents**

The families and parental involvement are important segments of the project. It is evident that many of the problems which confront the boys are ones derived from poor family dynamics and interactions. The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program recognizes that parental involvement can be difficult to attain and sustain and works very hard to achieve family participation, Special parent-child activities are provided at least four times a year primarily during Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and in the spring at the Awards Banquet. These events provide times to showcase program activities and are designed to recruit and encourage families to participate more fully in the program.

All activities are designed to enhance child development. A monthly newsletter is sent informing families of FWEP activities, as well as other events in the school. The newsletter provides tips on how to be an effective parent. For example:

*It is quite normal for your child to dream of glamorous careers, especially in the area of sports. However, students seldom realize that an education is an important predecessor to any career. Help your children to be well prepared to reach their goals. Students who failed to prepare, prepare to fail.*

Periodic workshops for the parents are conducted on topics such as how to deal with discipline problems, how to discuss sexuality with a son, and how to help with school work. Parental support groups are also a vital part of the program providing parents with the opportunity to discuss any issues that are important to them.

Staff members make home visits to assess parent-child interactions, and they provide activities to promote positive communication between the boys and their parents. These opportunities typically occur during holiday periods. One activity was designed to build trust between mothers and their sons. The women were blindfolded and led through an obstacle course (bowling pins), guided by their sons with encouragement from other boys, parents, and staff. The program director says that these parents just don't have time to enjoy their sons, and the FWEP tries to create situations and events where this can occur. The program's work with parents includes helping them get social services and holding monthly counseling and support groups.

Parents respond favorably to the program. When asked what the project has meant to her and her son, one mother responded: "It is great; they take the pressure off. You know it's hard to raise boys by yourself and I never really know what to say to the teachers when I have to go see them. Mr. Mac and the others help me to know what to say. They interpret for me, I guess you could say.

The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program has helped my boy, 'cause they got him involved in things, and he don't hang around the streets so much."

This mother, whose son was engaged in supervised constructive activities after school, said that, for him, the program was fun. When asked why, he responded, with a shy smile, "Cause it's like family. It's nice to be with other guys and do things."

Parents attend the special functions in greater numbers than they participate in the support group activities. More than 90 percent attend the parent-child activities built around the holiday themes and the awards banquet held at the end of the program year. However, only 25 to 50 percent of parents participate in the monthly support meetings.

*by Mary Lou Adams, Ph.D.*

## **Program Activities for the School**

The Fifth Ward Enrichment Program focuses on the social environment of the school setting as well as on the behavior of the boys and on their parents. The staff members of FWEP conduct activities to increase the faculty's understanding of the children they teach and to bridge the gap between parents and teachers. Workshops are conducted on in-service days to achieve this goal. FWEP staff members establish a relationship with each participant's teacher and maintain an open channel of communication. The staff members visit with several teachers daily to determine how the boys are doing and provide support. The staff works to build trust and to create positive interactions between themselves and the faculty. Since this is a community-based effort and not funded by the school district, a positive relationship is essential for cooperation and trust from the teachers. FWEP's staff also provides a number of support services for the faculty. For instance, the staff assisted with a parent-teacher conference day at one school by acting as receptionists for the event. Additionally, at the beginning of a school year they assist counselors in scheduling classes for all the children in the school.

## **Program Component for the Community**

Finally, FWEP brings together other organizations in the Fifth Ward to discuss common concerns. Relationships within the wider community have developed in the areas of public relations, funding, and referrals for service. FWEP also encourages the boys in the program to engage in community service projects such as painting an elderly resident's home.

Examples of partnerships developed in the community are with: Houston Independent School District, Harris County Juvenile Probation Department, Panhellenic Council of Houston, Leadership Houston, Fifth Ward Redevelopment Corporation, Phoenix Outreach Center, and Recovery Campus, a drug treatment facility for youth.

Other community service projects in which the boys are involved include participating in neighborhood clean-up campaigns, taking gifts and visiting with the elderly in nursing homes, community gardening, installing burglar bars and smoke detectors at the senior activity center. The director says that these activities "teach the boys they don't have to wait until they are grown to have value in the community. They are valuable now, just as they are."

## **Staff Responsibilities**

The staff of the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program consists of six adult black men who work with the program full time. They include a program director and several caseworker/counselors.

The ratio of target staff to participant is one counselor/caseworker for about 25 boys. The program director is responsible for overall program development -and supervision. He is also responsible for outreach and serves as liaison with other agencies, school representatives, and community organizations. A major task of the director is to negotiate the interactions and relationships among the boys, parents, teachers, and staff.

The caseworker/counselors of FWEP have responsibility for managing participant caseloads as well as for providing counseling and communication with parents and teachers. They also conduct initial interviews with the families and coordinate activities. Other support staff for FWEP are also black men, and they include the program's clinical psychologist as well as workshop leaders for karate and drama.

## **Evaluation**

In order to determine the effectiveness of the program an evaluation of project activities was conducted over a three-year period. The evaluation documents the experiences of three cohorts of participating boys (96 total) and of the men who worked with them between September 1985 and May 1988. The data for the Study were collected through the use of questionnaires, interviews, and observations.

The primary research questions were: (1) How well did the program meet its broad aim? (2) Is the intervention strategy of using adult black men to assist in the socialization of particular young males effective in promoting responsible adulthood and preventing these youths from becoming part of the juvenile justice system? (3) Does participation in the Fifth Ward Enrichment program bring about positive changes in behavior and attitudes of participants and parents?

The analysis was based on four samples. Three of these were for one-year periods of Participation, and one covered two years. The boys in the one-year samples were found to have few meaningful attitudinal and behavioral changes. The parents of these participants also revealed few of the hoped-for changes. Participation in the program for a two-year period did, however, bring about significant increases in the boys' self-concepts, self-reliance, and conduct ratings. The two-year cohort also received substantially fewer disciplinary reports.

Overall, none of the boys who participated in the program became involved with drugs or the juvenile justice system. Perhaps one of the most significant follow-up findings was that a much higher proportion of the RVVP participants remained in school compared to a random sample of their peers who had attended the same middle school.

In summary, the results of the Study showed that interactions between the men and the boys were successful in positively changing the boys' attitudes and behavior. It is clear that this form of interaction does have promise for improvement in the potential for success of inner-city black male youths.

## **A Model for Others**

The Fifth Ward Enrichment Project is a unique effort because it goes about the business of providing male-to-male interactions for boys who have such relationships missing in their daily experiences. The program developed an intervention strategy of using adult black men as role models for inner-city youth. Activities were developed to provide opportunities for interaction between men and boys in a consistent manner to reach boys how to behave as responsible adults.

The self-concepts and expectations that an individual forms of himself are acquired through socialization. What an individual acquires depends largely on the kind of people with whom he associates and the larger social environment in which activities take place. Communities and neighborhoods need to know that programs like FWEP can be developed if caring adult men can be recruited to work with boys daily so that the boys can see the everyday patterns of adult male behavior.

by *Mary Lou Adams, Ph.D.*

## **EPILOGUE 1994**

Reading "Gentlemen, Shall We Begin Again?" ushered in a flood of memories. The publication is timely because the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program (FWEP) has just entered its second decade of operations. Without the vision and support from the Hogg Foundation, there would be no FWEP. The contents of Dr. Adams' manuscript rekindled thoughts and feelings, provoking the re-experience of days in the corridors and classrooms at H.P. Carter. Those same young boys she has written about are now 23 and 24 years old. Of that initial group of thirty-five, one is dead and two are incarcerated. The rest have managed to put together their lives in ways varying from a fragile ghetto existence to a quasi-stable working family lifestyle. The young men are in a variety of employment settings, from day labor to part-time work while struggling to get an undergraduate degree.

I can vividly recall the prophetic words of Dr. James Comer who was then a Hogg Foundation Advisory Council member. He embraced our working concept as "intuitively correct." He also warned all involved that it would take no fewer than eight years before one could see some measurable outcomes.

What Dr. Adams so aptly describes were the embryonic days of the FWEP. After fording many rivers and struggling through uncharted territory, we find those days somewhat remote. We were naive and idealistic then. Each year the FWEP staff and advisors try to upgrade the program, to refine it and sharpen the thrust. The realities of living in a war zone and actively listening to the various expressions of the youth served have guided the program's development. We have consciously tried to shift from operating as a riverfront hospice that plucks the victims from the swift currents to moving upstream and interceding in the battle itself, recruiting youth to become partners in the fight.

Today we are community based. We work in shifts from noon to nine while our support office maintains the regular eight-to-five hours. We now partner with public schools, city parks, housing authority residents and managers, church leaders and barrio activists. We are learning to treat youth as our primary partners for community development.

We have three youth enterprises fully operational--a computer repair/resale shop, a silk screen production company, and a filmmaking project. We are also a juvenile violence prevention project (funded by the Centers for Disease Control and prevention). Community service projects and leadership development retreats/seminars have become program mainstays over the past three years. We have become more network and volunteer dependent to maintain the small group interactions between youth participants and mentors as the program demand increases. As long as homicides are the number one cause of death among this population and more African-American males are in prison than are in college, the FWEP will continue to struggle for proactive, youth-led and community-owned solutions.

**Ernest McMillan**  
**FWEP Program Coordinator**