

## **Dark Passage Leads to Bright Future for Boys The Boys to Men Mentoring Network comes to Minnesota**

**by James Beach, *The Phoenix*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2002-06-07.**

We all have a geeky snapshot that refuses to be obliterated from mind's eye; you know the one. Maybe the braces on your teeth give your smile its glint, or acne grants you a Rudolphesque nose, or the conformist crew cut your father forced you to get made your ears stick out like open car doors. Or perhaps your conflict was more internal, an awkward stance or a subtlety curled lip hinting at teenage strife.

Whatever image you retain about adolescence, you probably can recall how difficult those years could be. Pressure from teachers, parents and peers often felt overwhelming. For many of us addictive types, alcohol, drugs, sex, vandalism and other forms of rebellion seemed the only solution.

An estimated 75,000 youths in Minnesota could benefit from some type of mentorship. Organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, Kinship Program, and Boys To Men Mentoring Network offer adults the opportunity to help kids grow up right, but one problem threads its way through all of these and similar groups: there aren't enough mentors to go around.

Teenage boys, especially, can benefit from the support and guidance of an adult who doesn't fall under the "authoritarian" category of father, teacher, coach or clergyman. Boys To Men of Minnesota, which will kick off its first official year this month, offers adult men the opportunity to mentor 12-16 year-old boys on a volunteer basis.

"Mentoring is different than fathering." says program director Charlie Borden. "Sometimes men mentor boy they already know through the program, but these are usually adult friends of the family."

Though some dads may feel threatened by this arrangement, most mentor programs are founded on the principle that having a separate mentor can often help a young man in ways the father can't. It really does take a village to raise a child.

Having a mentor match requires family support too. As the boys change and grow, however, parents are needed support the process. BTM Program coordinators believe that such participation has inspired several dads to become more involved with their sons' lives sometimes because of the fear of being replaced by the mentor.

This is ironic because mentors are usually involved for a year or so whereas a father usually stays connected forever. It is also interesting that most of last year's

dozen or so boys were enrolled by single moms.

Borden, who is open about his recovery from substance abuse and other addictions, grew up living apart from his father in a house full of transient borders. He remembers growing up with an intense need for the approval and acceptance of older men, which is something Borden says that today's' teenage boys are still struggling to find.

"Kids today are left to their own vices," he says. "We end up with yet more uninitiated men who cannot give back to their communities."

Originally founded in San Diego, CA, the Boys to Men Mentoring Network has a five-year history of success. Its "Rites of Passage" program combines an adventure weekend, mentorship, and peer support groups as a part of a comprehensive approach to guiding inner city boys into manhood.

At a recent informational meeting for local men interested in becoming Boys To Men mentors, all in attendance agreed that teenagers need the influence of caring adults. But reasons for wanting to mentor varied considerably. Some men had idyllic childhoods and wished to recreate the beneficial experiences they'd had with mentors. Others admitted to decades-old feelings of never being able to please their fathers, of wishing for positive reinforcement. Some of these men wanted to make peace with the hardship of going through their difficult years without a role model.

"Coming from an abusive, alcoholic family, my first 30 years were a quest to repopulate my life with men," says Earl Hipp, author of several self-help books and a Hazelden title. "I think boys and men are hardwired to do this."

Hipp already mentors a boy through another program, and he and his wife occasionally look after the teens of a single mom, yet he wishes he could do more. He does plan to serve on staff during the Boys To Men Adventure Weekend this summer, and will consider mentoring if he can find the time. "It's an incredible program," says Hipp, "I would dig ditches for these guys."

The rustic getaway consists of three parts, and Borden remains publicly somewhat mysterious about the process details so the new boys are ensured a sense of adventure. (Parents and guardians are given the full itinerary, however.) Bonfires, challenges, initiation and celebration figure into the weekend, which ultimately turns the teenage boys into "journeymen" and prepares them for the year ahead.

"It's a bit like boot camp to begin with," states Borden. "The boys won't be handed anything; becoming a 'journeyman' is something they must work for."

Once initiated, the youths move into the second part of the program, which is a year of activities, such as paintball, spelunking or climbing behind the wheel of a bobcat. Meanwhile, the mentors strive to instill values by teaching anger management,

appreciation of the feminine and masculine, respect for one's own "shadows" and limitations, communications skills, and knowledge of the natural world.

"But a mentor shouldn't be matched with a version of himself at that age," Borden cautions. "Otherwise his personal stuff will quickly start to surface."

Borden and his associates do screen mentors, staff and boys before sending them out into the woods. In addition to an open house and individual interviews, a criminal and residential background check are conducted on every applicant, and their readiness and maturity is assessed. The boys readiness is also assessed "Sometimes a 17 year-old can be too hard, or a 14 year-old can be too soft," says Borden. "He has to have reached his 'rebellious stage in life for the rites of passage part of the program to be effective."

Mentors must make a strong commitment to the program before they will be paired with a needy boy. This includes attending the Mentors' Training Weekend, and the Boys' Passage adventure weekend. Finally new mentors must commit to making regular face-to-face contact with the youth, while following the BTM motto "listen, accept, and admire."

"Mentoring is a transforming experience," sums up Hipp. "[These types of programs] transform the men as well as the boys."

Anyone interested in becoming a mentor, signing up as staff, or enrolling a teenage boy in the Boys to Men Program can contact Charlie Borden, 651-230-8002.