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Role Models Needed

Alexandria Mentoring Partnership wants to match interested volunteers with at-risk youth.

[By Michael Lee Pope](#)

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When Michael Mackey was a probation officer, he had an experience with a 15-year-old boy who had a substance abuse problem and family disputes. He had run afoul of the law, found himself in court and was clearly headed down the wrong road. Although Mackey was working with the boy in a professional capacity, he followed his instincts and put on another hat – that of a mentor.

“He was distraught and at wit’s end, and he couldn’t seem to be in the same room with his parents,” said Mackey. “So we left his parents in the office and took a walk around the block. We just talked, and it helped him regroup.”

Since that day, the boy has repaired the broken relationship with his family, reclaimed his life from drugs and is flourishing in school. Mackey, meanwhile, has left the probation office to become the city’s first gang prevention and intervention coordinator. But the memory of that day – and the importance of mentoring – has never been far from his mind.

“Mentoring is seen as a best practice for so many prevention efforts – prevention of crime, prevention of gangs, prevention of teen pregnancy, prevention of drug abuse and prevention of poor school performance,” said Mackey. “So the city is trying to enhance the way that we recruit, train and support mentors.”

As part of that effort, city officials have formed the Alexandria Mentoring Partnership. Run by the court-services unit of the Alexandria Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, the partnership hopes to pair those in need of mentoring with those willing to volunteer their time. The partnership will direct volunteers to one of 13 programs in the city. Court Services Director Lillian Brooks said that the partnership is looking for people who are willing to commit to at least a year of service.

“What we don’t want is volunteers who mentor for a couple of months and then drop out,” said Brooks. “These kids already have abandonment issues, and we don’t want them to be abandoned again.”

Get Involved

For more information on the Alexandria Mentoring Partnership, contact Michael Mackey at 703-838-4180, extension 242.



Caroline Myers, a mentor with the Higher Achievement program, speaks to a standing-room-only crowd during an informational meeting about the new Alexandria Mentoring Partnership last week.

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Brooks said that the idea for the partnership was formed in March during a citywide gang summit, when city officials, school leaders, concerned parents and involved students gathered to brainstorm about ways to combat youth violence. One of the most interesting proposals, Brooks said, was the idea of creating a clearinghouse for the city's various mentoring programs.

"During the summit, people overwhelmingly talked about mentoring," said Brooks. "It became clear that we needed to organize all these programs together."

ENTER THE Alexandria Mentoring Partnership, a collaborative effort of various programs and the city government. During a Jan. 9 City Council meeting, Mayor Bill Euille challenged city residents to volunteer their time to mentor children in need of role models. While presenting a proclamation honoring January as Mentoring Awareness Month, Euille said that the city needed 150 adult volunteers.

"My success in life has a lot to do with the fact that I had the benefit of strong mentors and role models as I grew up in this city," Euille said after presenting the proclamation. "We all can play a part in helping young people who lack the resources to raise their sights and dream of doing great things, as I did."

During a Jan. 31 meeting at the Lyceum, the partnership officially launched its efforts with an informational meeting. Mentors talked about their experiences working with children, and those who have mentors talked about the special relationships that have been formed. Interested volunteers were referred to one of the 13 participating programs, each of which had representatives on hand to explain how their program worked and what kind of time commitment was involved. When all was said and done, city officials counted 90 new mentors in Alexandria.

"We were overwhelmed by the response we got at the Lyceum. It was standing-room only," said Brooks. "We're still getting calls from people who want to mentor."

According to the proclamation passed by the City Council last month, 17.6 million kids in the United States are in situations that put them at risk of living up to their potential. To combat this phenomenon, city leaders say that they are committed to finding adult volunteers who are willing to spend at least two to four hours a week in an effort to helping youth prevent teen pregnancy, stop drug use and stay out of trouble.

"It takes a whole village to raise a child," said Mayor Euille. "We all have a responsibility to mentor and role model for our young people. I wouldn't be where I am today without them."

Mentoring Opportunities:

-- Barrios Unidos: This group seeks to prevent and curtail violence among youth by providing them with positive, life affirming activities. Its members seek to reclaim youth, families and neighborhoods through culturally appropriate community building efforts through one-on-one intervention programs.

-- Big Brothers and Big Sisters: Volunteer mentors with this group spend four hours per week one-on-one with the young person doing everyday activities, such as playing sports, seeing a movie, cooking, going over schoolwork, visiting a museum, taking a walk, volunteering in their community or just hanging out.

-- Buildings Better Futures: This group seeks to expand educational and career opportunities for Latino and other youth whose first language is not English. Tutoring and mentoring activities take place Monday through Thursday at T.C. Williams High School from 3:35 p.m.

to 4:55 p.m.

-- Child and Adolescent Mentoring and Support Services: Known by its acronym, CHAMPS, this group wants to address the need to help children of incarcerated parents successfully transition into adolescence.

-- Essex House: This group seeks volunteers to help children feel more confident in school and improve grades. Its leaders provide short-term individual, family and group supportive prevention counseling as well as educational and referral services.

-- Grandfathers Group: Created by the Campagna Center, the mission of this group is to promote and enhance positive youth development for young African-American males whose fathers are absent from the home by recruiting senior male mentors to offer a stabilizing influence through serving as positive role models.

-- Higher Achievement: Beginning in October, this 26-week after-school program offers academic enrichment activities Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. Students commit to three semester-long artistic studios, such as Afro-Caribbean music, pottery, and chess.

-- iMentor: Students are matched with minority and immigrant adult male mentors to make a movie, using digital camera and iMovie training. In the spring, movies are debuted at a community film-festival, raising funds to pay for filmmaker's productive use of leisure time throughout the summer months and to purchase back-to-school supplies.

-- Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center: The detention center holds juveniles who are awaiting court appearances. It seeks volunteers to create safe and secure setting that advocates good mental and physical health.

-- Space of Her Own: After a week of rapport-building, girls are matched with adult female mentors who work with them to complete art and design classes, creating hope chests, personalized thrones, lamp shades, floor cloths and face masks. The program is loosely based on the popular television show, "Trading Spaces."

-- Project Seaport: In weekly or bi-weekly meetings, youth participate in a structured program that include group discussions, field trips, role playing and individual discussions. The core curriculum consists of confidence-building exercises in the areas of communication, decision making, goal setting and career planning.

-- The Untouchables: The youth themselves run the club, which meets every Thursday from 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Charles Houston Recreation Center. Adult male volunteers attend the weekly club meetings and, with the prevention therapists, provide supportive counseling, tutoring, training in peer pressure refusal skills and assistance with anger management.

-- Wright to Read: Created by the Frank and Betty Wright Foundation, this group offers two program opportunities: Mentors can work with students for one or more hours per week outside of the school day or participate in "Book Buddies," in which volunteers read with students for one hour each week after school in one of two elementary school libraries.

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