

New Orleans City Business
November 3, 2008

Programs helps at-risk youth avoid prison path - Lone mentor mediates school issues, fills role of absentee fathers by Richard A. Webster

Social worker Glenis Scott works with at-risk youth at the Youth Empowerment Project. (photo by Frank Aymami)



Youth advocate Renell Gibbs was making the rounds at Alexander P. Tureaud Elementary School when he got the news — a 10-year old boy he mentors threatened to kill his Spanish teacher.

Gibbs sat down the troubled child. He didn't yell at him. Gibbs asked the boy what was wrong, why did he do what he did — and listened. The boy opened up to his 27-year-old mentor the way he wouldn't to his teachers, Gibbs said. He said he was having a bad day, that no one would listen to him, and his frustration and anger boiled over.

Among young children, the boy's complaints were common but his reaction indicated something more troubling simmering beneath the surface.

Gibbs calmed the boy down and the next day escorted him to the Spanish teacher's office so the child could apologize for his outburst. They haven't had any problems with the boy since, Gibbs said.

But had Gibbs not been there to provide support, things could have played out much worse, said Melissa Sawyer, Youth Empowerment Project executive director. Most at-risk children in New Orleans come from broken homes with no father figure. When an incident happens at school, there is no family member available to come running. Their mothers work all day, sometimes at several jobs, and can't leave every time their child gets into trouble.

This is when inner city children need a parental figure the most, before a troubling situation turns more serious and ends with the child entering the criminal justice system, Sawyer said. It's Gibbs' job, as part of a new pilot program spearheaded by the Youth Empowerment Project, to provide around-the-clock support to at-risk youth in hopes the attention will spare them from spending the majority of their lives in prison.

"We're trying to get to these kids when there's still this light in their eyes," Sawyer said. "If we can grab them now, there's a real chance they won't get caught up in the system. Unfortunately, most of these kids come from families where all of their older siblings have been in jail. We're trying to keep them from going down that same road."

The YEP community-based mentoring program targets children between ages 10 and 14 at risk of becoming involved with criminal activity. Risk indicators include single-family households with a history of substance abuse or mental illness, siblings who have been arrested, enrollment in special education classes, truancy and sexual activity at an early age.

"We have certain criteria, but honestly, to have a kid growing up in urban New Orleans, it's pretty easy to identify almost all of them at risk," Sawyer said.

The pilot program with an initial annual budget of \$120,000 started July 1 and has six children enrolled with plans to have 15 by year's end. Gibbs, the program's lone mentor, is responsible for providing all manner of support from transportation to attending school conferences.

Through YEP, children also receive after-school tutoring, anger management classes, mental health services, cultural excursions and weekly field trips to Metairie Park Country Day School.

"I know these teachers have more than one kid to look after and don't have time to sit down and really find out what's going on. That's where I come in," Gibbs said. "I talk to them about their day and ask them how they feel about it. We as adults sometimes can be control freaks. We figure we can just punish them, but you need to sit down and listen and find out what's wrong."

The program represents a new focus on pre-entry programs, reaching out to the youth before they run into trouble with the law, as opposed to re-entry programs that concentrate on assisting teenagers on probation and parole.

Before becoming involved with the mentorship program, Gibbs counseled young men and women recently released from prison. Two of his clients were the older brothers of the 10-year-old who recently threatened his Spanish teacher.

"There's nothing more tragic than thinking about a mom watching kid after kid after kid go to jail," said Heather Horton Hall, director of the Louisiana Justice Coalition. "There's a cradle-to-prison pipeline for a lot of the kids in New Orleans, and this is one way we're trying to address it." •