



Mentors That Matter

Mentors That Matter is a national project in which youth from four United States cities publicly honor the adults who matter in the lives of teenagers, beyond the home and classroom.

Sponsored by MetLife Foundation, Mentors that Matter is an initiative of What Kids Can Do, Inc., a national nonprofit whose mission is to bring forward the voices of youth about their lives and learning.

In Chicago as well as Tampa, Providence, and San Francisco, high school students worked to identify, interview, and photograph people in their communities who reach out to youth in ways that far surpass what their daily routines require.

Through the Small Schools Workshop in Chicago, students from Academy for Communications and Technology (ACT) Charter School and from the School for Social Justice at Little Village Lawndale High School took part. The resulting narratives and photographs were displayed in a celebratory event at the Garfield Park Conservatory, where students presented each Mentor with a medal of honor.

Selected essays and photographs from the exhibitions in each city appear in the book *Pass It On: Interviews by Youth with Mentors That Matter* (forthcoming, Next Generation Press). For more information, contact info@nextgenerationpress.org.

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Part of me is still a teenager, because that big change happened at that time. If we lose our entire reality at that age, it remains in the brain, a frozen memory.

The Lost Limb Exists

How do we build our lives after losing everything except love? I lost my family, I lost my identity, and I didn't exist or even speak for four years. People gave me shelter and work on a farm; they put themselves into danger by shielding me. In order not to give myself away, I played the role of a deaf mute.

At fifteen, I was old enough to understand what was happening. Where I lived, which was Yugoslavia, every Jew that was caught was killed. My sister was caught and killed at the end of the war. My father succeeded in crossing two borders but got killed too, by Nazis that were rounding up the leftover Jews. My mother survived but was very sick.

Unlike most people, I took books instead of clothes into hiding. I made my shoes and clothes out of old rags. I knew how to make wool. I always had a project, and if I didn't, I had my books. I read by sunlight or an oil lamp. I lived between the chicken coop and the pigsty, so I read in the midst of the rats running around; the rats didn't get me because the dogs were there. Our brain takes over, in order to stay alive in a war. One finds a way if one can think.

On one side, I was old, even. At the end of the war, when I found people when I met people who were in the same class as I was, I was matured and they were kids. I went to Israel, met my husband, and had three children, all grown now. I also have grandchildren that I talk to and give advice to.

But in a way, part of me is still a teenager, because that big change happened at that time. When you lose a limb, in the brain the sensation of the lost limb exists. And if we lose our family, if we lose our entire reality at that age, it remains in the brain, a frozen memory.

I'm eighty-one now. I still work. It is very important to always have projects, even now. I wrote down certain important stories for my own grandchildren, and that started a book. The book led into getting involved with Facing History and Ourselves. I have something to give to young people who are interested.

One thing that cannot be replaced is our brain. There can be artificial kidneys, and hearts, and lungs, but not the brain. This is what makes us who we are—what we think, how we think, how we think about ourselves and the other person. That is what makes us human—which needs a lot of improvement, in my opinion.



A Different Way of Doing Things

I was born here on the South Side of Chicago. When I was your age, I just wanted to kick it, party, hang out, be with my homies, hoop, and play other sports. I really didn't like school, but I liked my homies that were in school. So it was a good thing I had some mentors. There was this guy that was a coach of a basketball league; he was a cool cat. The most important thing, he said, was to stay on your books. "Do this sports thing," he said, "but really stay on your books."

At that time in the '80s and early '90s, we had people coming from all different neighborhoods into neighborhoods they weren't familiar with. We had a lot of similar problems to you all, with police accusing youth of stuff they didn't do, suspecting them to be criminals. My English teacher senior year said that if I wanted to make change, the first place I had to start was myself. Reading really helped me to find out a lot of stuff that was happening then. I wanted to learn more about what I was reading. Some teachers along the way, especially in high school, helped me to figure out what to look for.

You all as teenagers got it a little worse. If you make mistakes, the stakes are different and higher. You challenge us to be honest about what society is doing with young folks. I guess a mentor has to have that honesty. You have to really be able to listen, to address issues and concerns that folks may have, to check back and ask, "Am I hearing you right?" Then you can start

building on what you are trying to figure out. I think that listening is the most critical element.

I love volunteering at the school. It brings life into what I do as a professor at UIC, where you can just be in your office, writing, reading, filling out a report, going to a meeting. Being here with you all, seeing how you understand the world and the things that you do as far as changing the world—that's inspiring to me. You all keep me motivated to keep fighting for this school and thinking about everything I do.

I know that there has to be a better way. So how do you actually make it? Being here helps me realize one of the ways. If you all are able to ask questions, to make informed decisions, a lot of stuff can change. If we are sincere and committed to a different way of doing things, we could make some things happen. I think that is really what's happening with you all.



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Young people really do need to vent, and I often get a lot of that. I try to overlook the pain and anger. I still embrace this person as a person that is special to me.

“Us” and “Them”

When I went to high school, I already had an idea in my mind that I wanted to work with young people. I was working with the youth program in my church. We had a boys club and I was helping out with that, and during the summers I served as a camp counselor. A lot of my activities were more focused around the church than school. But I didn't know how you could earn a living doing it.

Now I'm full time in ministry, which I didn't imagine when I was a teenager. I went to school to study insurance. As I was getting ready to graduate, I worked in the career counseling center, helping other students get resumes together and set up interviews. The person in charge said, "Dream and think outside the box. If there is something you want to do and you don't see a position for yourself, create it." That just turned a light on in me. I enjoyed business, but it wasn't exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to work more closely with people, rather than just shuffling papers around. That opened up a door to go right into ministry, working with high school students.

Working with young people is a passion for me. We run a high school club on Friday nights. We do a conference in Iowa at the end of the year for the high school students. I am actively involved in camping. I mentor a lot of high school students, trying to help them get prepared for what they want to do in life.

It was a natural progression. I went from being one of the young people to one of the staff helping

young people. When I was at camp as a teenager, there was a fellow named Joe Washington. I learned a lot from him, by watching what he did. He wasn't one that would sit down and give you ABC type instruction. He was pretty consistent and firm, and yet he was real gentle and had patience in how he was doing it.

A lot of young guys I work with, they are angry with their dads who are absent and are not there. Young people really do need to vent, and I often get a lot of that. I understand it a little bit, but it still hurts. How do I deal with it? I try and overlook the pain and the anger. I still embrace this person as a person that is special to me.

I was mentoring a young man who is now a pastor. I was encouraging him to preach and he was trying to make this transition from being what he called "us" and "them." "Them," he said, was "all you adults." He explained, "We as teenagers don't necessary want to associate ourselves with adults too soon, because then it makes us have a hard time relating to our peers." He decided to go into ministry full time, and I am really proud of that.

Young people today has gotten burned a lot and they don't trust adults. But I try and tell them, "Don't let anybody stop you from your program." When you get too cynical and angry, it will stop you from doing what you need to do. You have got to have commitment. Learn how to commit yourself to something. Work hard.



I See Leadership in You

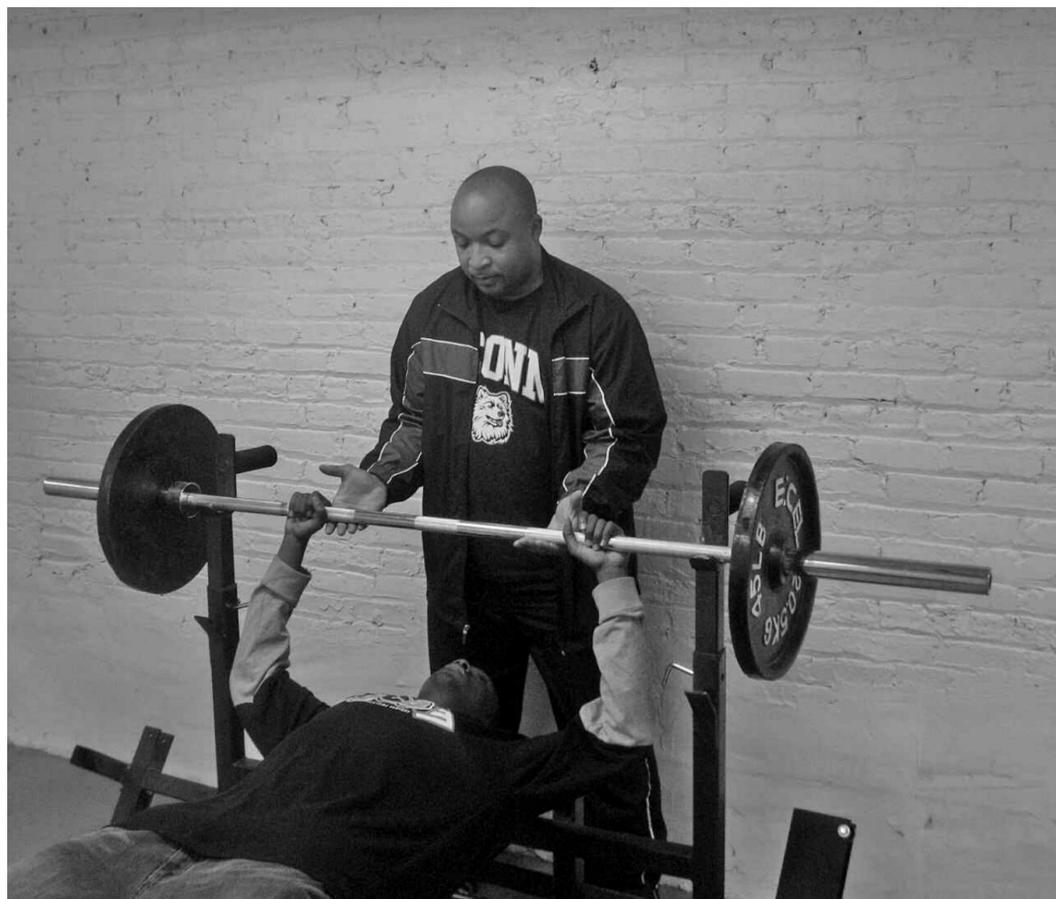
When I was in high school, I didn't want to spend any time with any adults. I didn't want anything to do with school or teachers. I had other plans for myself: I was going to be a defense attorney or a really good prosecutor. But one of my teachers told me, "I see leadership in you and you should take advantage of that." I was one of the few black students at a mostly white school. I can name the black kids at my school on four fingers, and that's not counting me. For that teacher to just come up to me and say "I see that in you" was special. From there I ended up running for student council and becoming its vice president and then president.

I think that everybody has something that they are destined to do, and when you find it you feel comfortable. Seven years ago I just fell into teaching when I was working for the Chicago Department of Health. One of the founders of this school wanted me to come here and teach video.

Right now, my main job is to deal with students who can't behave or control themselves in class. As an adviser or mentor, you just have to figure out which solution would fit that kid—not which one is easier for you. Sometimes you have to beat the kid over the head with a stick and sometimes you have to take a step back and watch them fail. Sometimes it means listening and coming up with a solution with them. We underestimate teens sometimes. They can do more than what we give them credit for.

The kids who are part of student government, some of them struggle after high school, but they always have some skill they've learned to fall back on. When I see students plan stuff for other things, and I know they've learned how to do this through student government, I appreciate that. My inspiration is the moments that I see the kids that have succeeded and are proud of something.

You just have to figure out which solution would fit that kid—not which one is easier for you. We underestimate teens sometimes. They can do more than what we give them credit for.



We always say, “We don’t have time for this.” I think sometimes in a black community we don’t take hold of time. Every minute, something is being made. There is so much I have to get to you.

You Couldn’t Pay Me

Life for me at seventeen was a little difficult. I graduated out of high school at the age of sixteen. I was going to my first year of college and it was pretty rough. Being from a home of divorced parents, I was living with my father. I was excited about playing basketball. But at the same time I was out there living the fast life in the south suburbs of Chicago, drinking and smoking, doing things that I shouldn’t have been doing. Not in a hundred years you couldn’t pay me to think that I would be coaching at the high school level in Chicago. You couldn’t pay me to say that I would be teaching kids, because I was out there clowning myself.

I started making connections with young people around the mid-’90s, when I started trying out for different basketball teams. I would go to different gyms and kids would come over and ask, “Why are you shooting by yourself?” I would tell them, and they would be all geeked up and interested about it. I would explain to them how basketball is hard work, tell them my story and some of the things I went through. And that’s when I made a change for the better.

Your teenage years are some of your roughest years, because you’re in the transition of mistakes that you might have made as a child, or you’re living through mistakes that your parents might had made. You’re getting ready to go into adulthood, where you have to make decisions, especially between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. So you’re really getting ready to

make that jump, and a lot of things began to catch up with you. I try to show as much kindness and sincerity as possible, but at the same time let kids know that there is a real world out there and they will be decision makers. Kids need to know about some of the potholes and the lies and the misconceptions—through athletics, through academics, through life in general.

I do give up a lot of my time, especially when a kid pulls me to the side and they need immediate help. I’m always trying to better the young people around me. Sometimes I leave the house at six-thirty in the morning and usually don’t get home till six or seven at night.

We always say, “We don’t have time for this” or “It’s not time for this.” I think sometimes in a black community we don’t take hold of time. Every minute, somebody is dying or living, something is being made, even when we are enjoying company and relationships. I wasted some time, and now I want to push out to young people. There is so much I have to get to you, before you get to a certain age.

You’re always challenging, you’re always pushing that kid, you’re always pushing yourself to push that kid. So that kid sees that with hard work there are things you can strive on. The obstacles don’t stop—and once you overcome one obstacle, there’s always going to be another one.



I've Been Knowing Them for a Long Time



We talk, they tell me about things going on at home in their lives, their friends. I really like the kids. I'm probably like their second mom, I guess. I kind of look out for them.

I am a school bus driver. I'm pretty much gone fourteen hours a day, driving from six in the morning to six in the evening. I sometimes spend more time with the teenagers on my bus than I do with my own daughter. I pick them up and take them to school. We talk, they tell me about things going on at home in their lives, their friends. And then I take them back home.

I started driving the school bus in 2002. I was tired of being a nurse assistant and, I was just looking through the paper one day and I seen an ad for school bus drivers. I really like the kids, so I guess that's why I've been doing it for so long. I'm probably like their second mom, I guess I can say, because I've been knowing them for a long time and taking them back and forth to school. I kind of look out for them and make sure they get to school safe and get home safe.

When I was a teenager I spent a lot of time with my aunt, and with my family and friends. When you hang around older people, they show you a lot of things and teach you a lot of things. I learned how to be independent, work hard, and take care of family, because family means everything. I'm there for my family all the time, if they need me to do things for them, like take my grandmother back and forth to the doctor.

Teens are very smart, and they act like they know everything. I guess they are more independent than we were when we were younger. They have more freedom than we had, and they have a lot more stuff, like cell phones and credit cards. It was not like this when we

were growing up. We pretty much had to rely on our parents. This generation, they really pretty much handle themselves. But I try to tell them they don't know everything.

Being around the young kids makes me feel younger and keeps me more alive and wanting to go to work. My job is very easy, but it also can get difficult if the kids is not nice. The kids being very nice and respectable, that makes me motivated to keep going. Some of my kids that move on and go away, we still talk. Sometimes we'll get together, maybe go out to the movies or just sit around and talk.

I tell kids: Just stay in school. Whatever goal you want to accomplish in life, just don't let nobody tell you that you can't do it. Just keep striving. Keep going on.



We make art and we talk about art. I end up building relationships with them. Hey, I was a kid once. I try to listen.

Like Drinking Coffee in the Morning

I didn't like high school. I went to a seminary school for young men who are thinking about becoming a priest. They kicked me out during my sophomore year because they said I had no potential to become a priest. When I was a senior, my girlfriend was pregnant. I was expecting a baby.

I was really bleak, starting to lose hope for the future. I didn't see myself doing anything interesting. I was running out of ideas, approaching a dead end. I thought I would be working at a factory somewhere.

I grew up in a pretty rough neighborhood, on the west side of 26th Street. There's a lot of gang activity there. It was even violent back then. My uncle was my mentor; he showed me how to be streetwise. He taught me to feel confident and how to portray myself so I wouldn't get picked on. How to stay away from all the trouble that was around such as gangs.

I felt like college was part two of high school. With all due respect to Columbia College, I think I picked the wrong school to go to. It's kind of funny, because I work for Columbia now—just at the time it wasn't a good school for me.

I am a professional artist. Fifteen years ago I started teaching by accident. A teacher went to see a show my artwork was in. She asked if I would come in and talk with her fourth-grade class about life as an artist. I was making a living as an artist; I was very successful and good things were happening. I didn't think I was going to be good at teaching.

I discovered I really enjoyed teaching and my students and teachers really loved me. Now I teach and I make art at the same time. I'm surrounded by teenagers. We make art and we talk about art. I end up building relationships with them. A lot of these kids don't have a lot of money or resources. I get to see them go through all the phases. I see them on the road to great things. The way I felt about my teenage years, I don't want anybody to ever go through that.

Every week I dedicate a certain amount of hours to working with young people and teachers. It's a struggle balancing my time. I try not to give up many things. I have to work out, swim, run and bike. If I don't exercise, then I'm not happy. I can't give that up. I have to spend time with my family—they're not happy, I'm not happy. I like to go out and listen to live music. I still do that, but I can't do it during the week like I used to. I try to stay cool about things.

If I disagree about something some teenager's doing, I try not to react harshly. I think about it and say, Hey, I was a kid once. I try to listen more like my uncle taught me. The people you are mentoring are not always going to live up to your expectations. Think about it as if they are humans and they are going to make mistakes.

Working with you all is like drinking coffee in the morning. Your energy is contagious. I come out here excited, inspired; I want to continue going strong. I never want to go home and sleep.



Part of Their Solution

When I was a teenager I grew up in a gang- and drug-infested community. I was misguided, and I also had a lot of family problems and legal problems. I was placed in juvenile probation.

One person I had a lot of respect for was my probation officer. She always treated me with a lot of respect, and she was there when I needed the most help. I always looked up to her. So I became a probation officer, and I'm pretty much like her now.

I wanted to come back and help teenagers that had the same problems that I had—to work with them to get away from gangs and drugs, to get educated and succeed in life. A lot of teenagers are in need. Many of them are being misused by adults. They have a lot of issues. And the problems of gangs and drugs aren't going anywhere.

For seven years I've been working in the Little Village community, and it continues to be a very rewarding challenge. I do gang intervention, drug intervention. I advocate for kids in court. I also provide individual counseling about drugs, gangs, school, anything. If a kid can't go to a school because of a gang-related issue, I find another school or get them into a GED program. If a kid has a lot of drug problems, I get them to outpatient or inpatient care.

If kids have problems with their families, I try to talk to them and solve those problems. I understand that families are making a lot of sacrifices financially.

Many of them migrated from Mexico to come here to live a better life. But they have problems with their kids. I step in, and I get to be part of their solution. When I help their family, it fulfills their dream. It gets them in the right direction and it makes me feel good. That's the best part of my job.

Once we give kids the help, it's up to them to do the right thing with it. I'm proud to say that a lot of my kids have been able to get their GED. They are in school, they are not abusing drugs, and they are making better decisions. That, for me, is success.



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When I started teaching video, I was working with a couple of kids that didn't have much knowledge. But as years passed, they moved on, and knew more than me.

Young Head, Old Head

When I started teaching the video production program Neutral Grounds at Street Level Youth Media, I realized that I had a touch for connecting with the youth. It's not really hard—this is what I do, and what I want to do in the future.

When I leave my apartment building, I bump into teenagers and chat with them. It's just natural. But I had to put other things aside to make time for the workshop. It's kind of hard to put school to the side.

I took a different road, I didn't finish high school, but I am about to graduate from college. Most kids ask me how I did that. That's not common, in my neighborhood at least. Education seems to be an area where kids seem to struggle. This example from my life, they can build on it.

When I started teaching video and editing, I was working with a couple of kids that didn't have much knowledge. But as years passed, they moved on, and knew more than me in video. I feel it's very important to step up and pass on, not just through school and music, through life, and be able to benefit from it.

Sometimes there are kids who may be at home not getting the motivation they need or not getting pushed at school. When they get involved with our workshop, we push them hard enough. I am really not a teacher but I am definitely big on discipline. It's a fun environment; I try to build a good relationship with them. Going out to schools, high school, grammar

schools or whatever. Or I have them come to Street Level and have them get involved at our video program.

When I am teaching video, I try to point out things that kids may be interested in, that might motivate them. I feel obligated to pass that on. When I was coming up, I had older people to share that experience with. That voice may still be there for some youth, but a lot of times it's not. There was a time when I thought age mattered, but it doesn't matter. You can pretty much get knowledge from anybody, even if they're a young head or old head.



That Extra Person to Talk To

I lived in this community my whole life and I passed through the same schools that everybody else here has gone through. I went to a Chicago public high school. This area is in serious need of assistance. That's why I'm here. I just want to help people out.

In this community, teens need a little bit of extra help. Sometimes family members are there for them, but not in certain ways that they need. Sometimes teenagers just need that extra person to talk to.

Stereotypes can be placed on anybody, not only different races or things like that, but also age groups. The things that we see a lot in the news is the negative side of teenagers. We hear of them being in gangs, doing graffiti, and all kinds of things. I think it's an unfair stereotype. Yeah, they do these things, but that doesn't mean that that's all of them. That stereotype can't be placed on every single teenager.

In my experience working with the teens here at Little Village Boys and Girls Club, I see quite the contrary. I see people working hard, really focusing on education and on each other, wanting to help each other. If you are not willing to help teens, then this is something that you can miss.



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Write Like You Talk

Usually when people tell me what I can't do, I end up proving them wrong. Whether you think so or not, I'm going to go ahead and do what I want to do. I help run a teen magazine, True Star, where I mentor teens in writing, and I also mentor them in school through a program called Gear Up.

I was an underachiever in school. I liked to hang out with my friends and listen to music and play music. I liked being more social, and writing. By seventeen, I had about three or four diaries. I always wanted to do something with my works, but I never wanted to do it in poetry outlets. I wanted to sing and do my music.

My mother's a teacher and she used to say, "One day you're going to end up teaching." I'd be looking at her like, "That would be the last thing on my mind that I would do—never, never." Actually it found me when I wasn't looking for it, and it ended up being kind of cool. I dig it. I like the balance, both education and art together. I look at education and what I do with my singing group, Allegra Delores, in the same way. There's no way I'm going to stop. There's no way.

Interacting with the teens, and with my music, I get less sleep! True Star, it's more than a job. The kids in this program call me on the weekends. I kick it with them. They ask for my advice. I don't want to play the mom role. Sometimes you don't need someone telling you what to do all the time. You just need a sounding board.

This girl I work with at the magazine is having

some problems at home. She's dropped out of school and basically homeless. She came to me and was like, "I really need this job." I had to tell her, "Dude, you really need to get back in school. You're a senior, doesn't make any sense! What you gonna do between 8 and 3, when you can be in school?" Sometimes you can't do what you want to do when you want to do it.

About five years ago, I started working with Gear Up, taking freshman and sophomores to college tours. I had a college degree and I was working a job as a receptionist, but after a while I'm thinking, "I can do more than just answer someone's phone." One day I saw this guy who I went to Columbia College with. He was telling me how he had this really bad day, but he loves what he does. He was talking about Gear Up. I was like, "I would love to do that." It took about three months, but I went from receptionist to academic advisor. It was very strange but it kind of just happened.

Just because you come from the ghetto doesn't mean that you are a bad person. Good people come from all walks of life, as well as bad people. You can make mad dough, but the strongest person knows how to work their brain instead of their body. A lot of youth have something to say, but they just don't know how to express that on paper. I say, "Write like you talk. Once you do that, read it out loud. Does it make any sense?" And when they do that, all of a sudden they're like, "I can do it." If you put it out to the universe, it will happen. If it can happen to me, it could happen to anyone.



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Style by the Stylist



As I'm doing girls' hair, we discuss things that are important to them. I listen to them and try not to judge them. I tell teens to do things by their own choice.

When I was a teenager I was probably more settled than the average seventeen-year-old. I always read a lot. I had the passion to do hair at a very young age.

After I graduated from high school, I overheard a conversation with some young teenagers. I asked would they mind if I suggested something to them, because I was concerned about the conversation they were having.

I am a hair stylist now. As I'm doing girls' hair, we discuss things that are important to them. I listen to them and try not to judge them. Because no matter how settled I was at their age, no matter how many books I read, I still did things that I know now were not right, especially in my parents' eyes. It's the usual things: I cut classes and went to the game room when I should have been in a math class, so teachers called home.

One young lady called me a few years ago, when she was upset and depressed about a choice she made. As time went by, she couldn't handle the choice she'd made. I talked with her from a spiritual level, never judging her. Later on, she called and said, "I just want to thank you for your words of encouragement and the fact that you never judged me."

I'm surprised that children today make so many of their choices based on peer pressure, just to fit in. I never had to struggle to fit in, and I never had an issue that I could not talk to my parents about. Today, I tell

teens to do things by their own choice. Stand for who you are as an individual.

I try to encourage all the girls to stay in school, further their education. That will help them achieve their goals in life and make things better for their future. I tell them, "No matter what obstacle comes your way, never give up."



You Feel What They Feel

I enjoy being around teenagers because they have so much information to give us about their life experiences. I know that the teenage years are the most difficult years. They are trying to find out who they are and how they fit into society.

I'm a site director for an after-school program and I'm about to start my own business working with adolescents and with adults. I also teach dance, such as spiritual praise, African tribal, and hip-hop dance, at various churches and elementary schools and at LaFollette Park.

Sometimes it's a bit challenging, considering the fact that I have teenagers of my own. Teens voice their opinions and they're quite honest about some things they do. Sometimes you want to choke them because of some of the responses that you get from them. But I

think it's rewarding. They're going into adulthood and you want to hear what they have to say.

People are people, and teenagers sometimes do things that maybe appear to be abnormal. Part of getting to know who they are is having close relationships, to the point where you feel what they feel, either negative or positive. When you see teens that are lost and that are hanging out on the street, they effectively don't have anyone to look up to. Mentorship is a big plus—helping our teens to develop the way they're supposed to.

Teens are very honest, they have a lot of creativity, and they contribute a lot to our world. I never give up on them, even though it becomes hard sometimes. I've never been a quitter. I take things like that seriously.

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A Response to the Times

I was born in Veracruz, Mexico. When I was a teenager, I participated in a club for teenagers where we would help my teacher, who was also a principal at a homeless shelter for children who lived in the street. We organized events like dances and bake sales, so that we would be able to buy shoes, clothes, and beds for them. I felt satisfaction that I was able to give them something they didn't have.

When I arrived to this country, I couldn't help noticing that schools needed more after-school activities for kids and teenagers. I also noticed that parents were busy with their work and most of their children had nothing to do in the afternoon. I found it very important to work and help in my community.

I choose Little Village as my place of work because that's where I observed a need for young children and teenagers. I think their attitudes and the way they act is the response to the time period they are living in. The interesting thing I find with the teenagers of this generation is their capacity and skills to maintain information.

I studied to be a professor in primary education and psychology, and I also studied classical ballet and dance. All this combined gives me the skills to help and motivate young children and teenagers to draw up goals and accomplish them. Also, they can gain confidence in themselves.

I've taken my students to regionals in the Hilton Hotel here in Chicago and to the national competition in Orlando, Florida and Las Vegas, Nevada, where we obtained platinum, gold, and silver medals. When we went to our first competition, the first whole row was reserved for teachers. My students danced on the theme of the Wizard of Oz. Behind me, I heard someone say, "What is this, Halloween?" and then start laughing. This made me feel very sad, but for my students I tried to act like nothing was wrong. Despite the negative attitudes in the crowd, the five dances we participated in won four gold medals and one silver medal.

I try to teach my dancers not to let anyone make them feel bad. My major satisfaction is seeing the expression on their faces, knowing they have accomplished their goal, and seeing them celebrate their victory.



When I arrived to this country, I couldn't help noticing that schools needed more after-school activities for teenagers. Most of the children had nothing to do.



Mentors That Matter

Mentors That Matter is a national project in which youth from four United States cities publicly honor the adults who matter in the lives of teenagers, beyond the home and classroom.

Sponsored by MetLife Foundation, Mentors that Matter is an initiative of What Kids Can Do, Inc., a national nonprofit whose mission is to bring forward the voices of youth about their lives and learning.

In Chicago, Providence, San Francisco, and Tampa, high school students have been working since January 2007 to identify, interview, and photograph people in their communities who reach out to youth in ways that far surpass what their daily routines require.

This spring, the resulting narratives and photographs are being displayed in a celebratory event and ongoing exhibit in each city, and students will present each Mentor with a medal of honor.

In late 2007, Next Generation Press will publish a book containing selected essays and photographs from these four exhibitions.

In June 2007, the narratives and photographs from all four participating cities will be posted at the What Kids Can Do website, www.whatkidscando.org.

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

- The Small Schools Workshop
- School for Social Justice at Little Village Lawndale High School
- Academy for Communications and Technology (ACT) Charter School



Many Ways to Be Educated

Before the hunger strike [to establish Little Village Lawndale High School], I was teaching at Manley High School. It was 100 percent African American, and I missed working with Latino kids in my neighborhood. The hunger strike was a way to work in the neighborhood in my free time. There were four of us that decided we were going to participate. I was the English spokesperson; if there was English-speaking media, they would push me in front of the camera. That was a role I didn't mind playing. If there's something I can contribute, I'm willing to do it.

The hunger strike taught me that there's many ways to be educated. A lot of people in our community may not know English or have a GED. But they have a lot of knowledge, and it's not based on a high school diploma or GED.

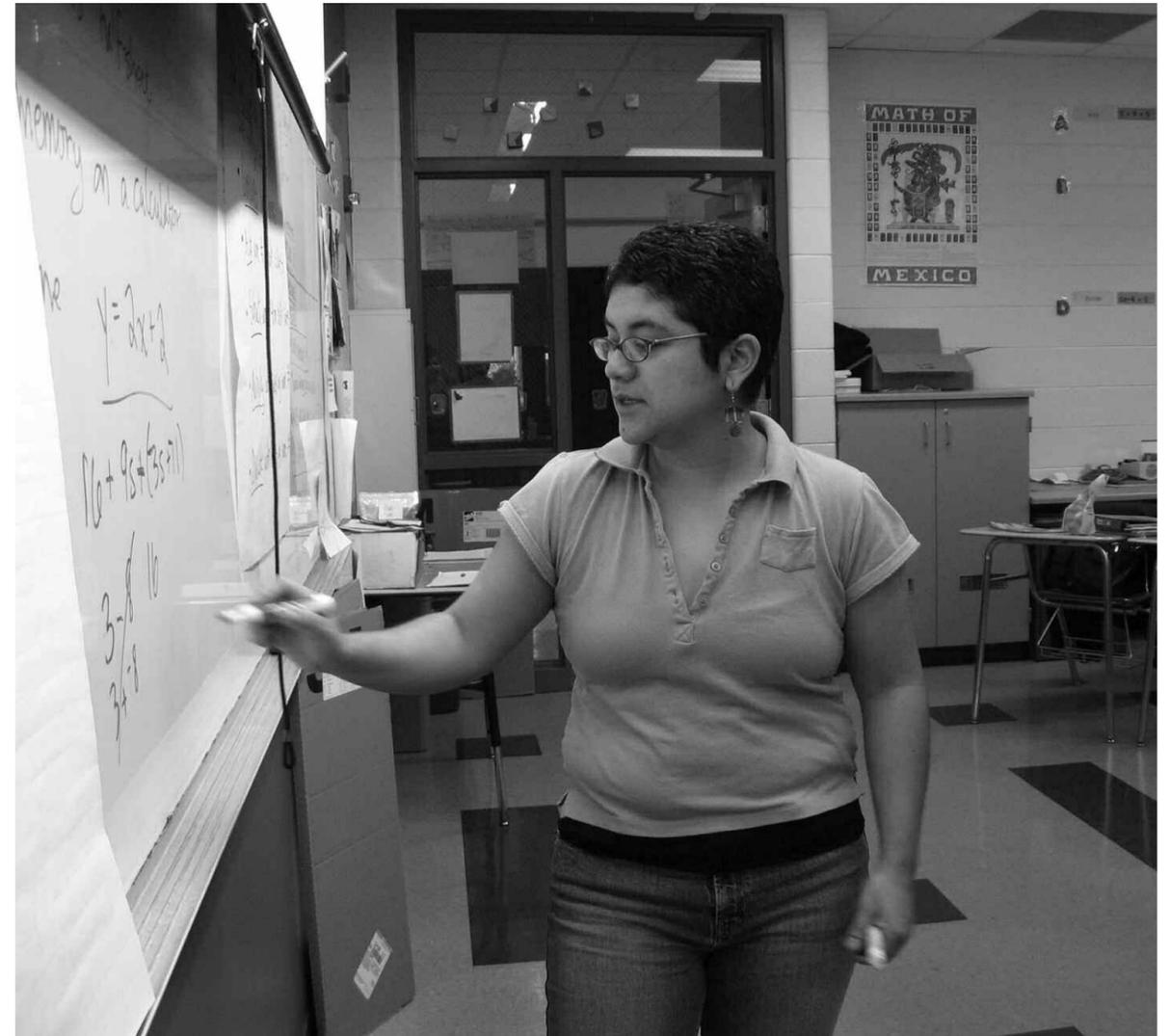
It's hard for young people to be successful, the way schools are designed today. A lot of people fail math, which is what I teach. We have a high dropout rate. So in the classroom and outside, I try to be supportive of young people. I try to celebrate who they are. As a mentor, I feel like sometimes we help fill those gaps that a lot of young people have in their life.

My mom worked in a factory, my dad was an alcoholic. It's not like they were trying to be bad parents, but with so many kids and their own problems they couldn't really take care of us the way they did when they first got married. There's a lot of violence out

there, and kids make bad choices because they don't have people to guide them.

If we believe the youth is the next generation and that they really impact the world, then we need to invest time and money into them. It's hard. Should you be a parent, friend, or mentor? I am learning to be patient—to get to know the person first, to understand what they need and want and expect.

I work really hard, and I feel like I don't have a choice. Then I think, "I'm lucky to even have a roof over my head." A lot of kids are homeless. Everybody doesn't have running water or a safe bed, and everyone should have that. It's our basic right. We have enough money in this country for nobody to go hungry, for people to have the basic necessities. It's because individuals are greedy that we have people living in poverty. That's why I feel like I don't have a choice. My conscience doesn't allow me to sit back and do nothing.



The hunger strike taught me that there's many ways to be educated. A lot of people in our community may not know English, but they have a lot of knowledge.



You All Don't Play

I grew up in New York City in the 1960s. My childhood was hard. My parents split up when I was young. People who were politically active within the struggles back then involved me in doing things. I started tutoring when I was in high school, almost forty years ago. So I've been doing this type of work for a long time. I figured that if there was something I understood, I could help other people learn it.

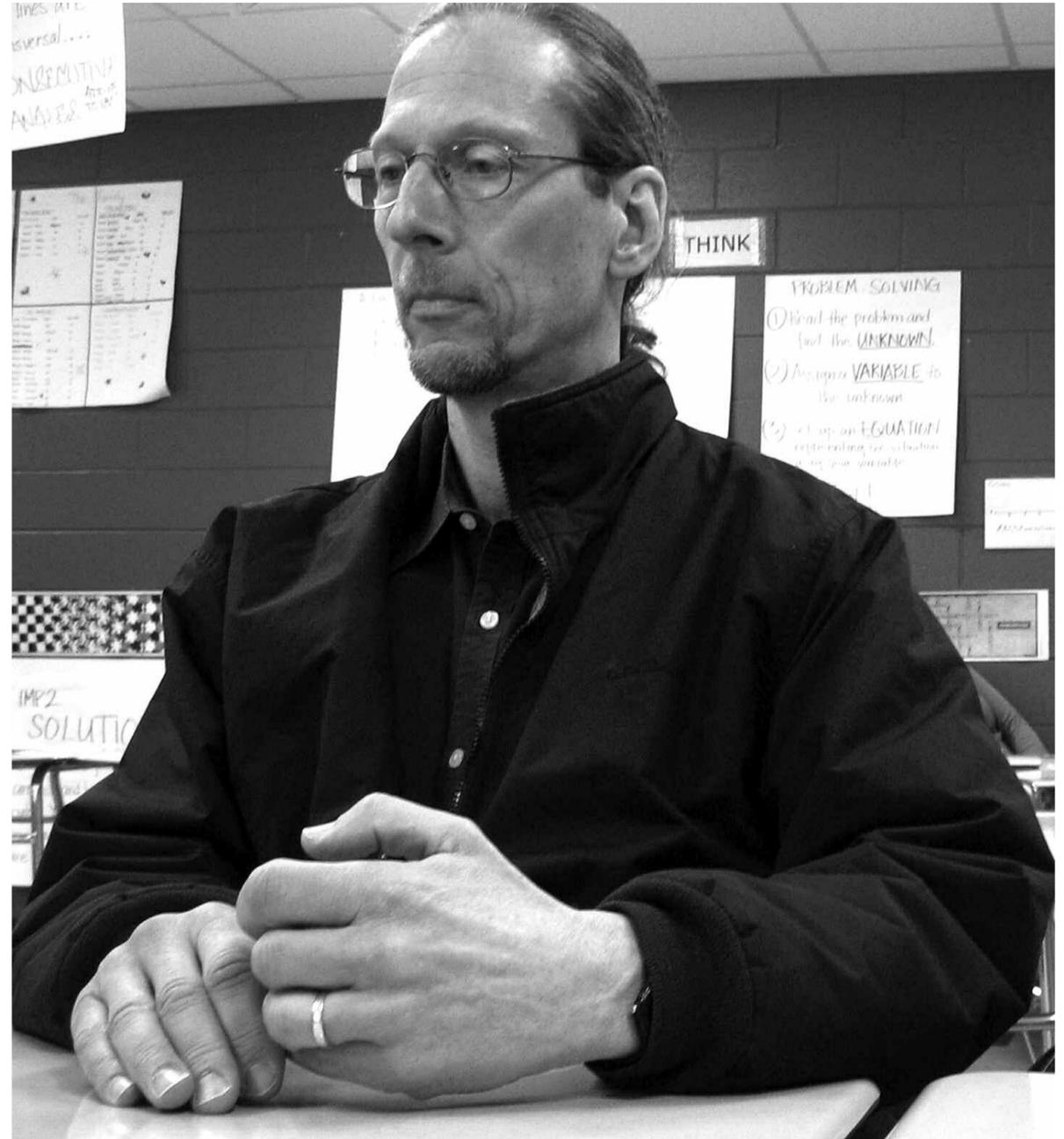
I really wanted to work with the School for Social Justice, because I look at you all as my allies. Youth has a very powerful sense of justice, and I want to work with you all to fight in the struggle for the things that are right. If we can work together to end the problems of racism, sexism, oppression, and exploitation that exist on this planet, we can build a brighter future. You always have setbacks, but I expect that we will get smarter and continue the struggle. I expect that you all will grow and become fighters for justice and will take the place of those who are going to get old at some point.

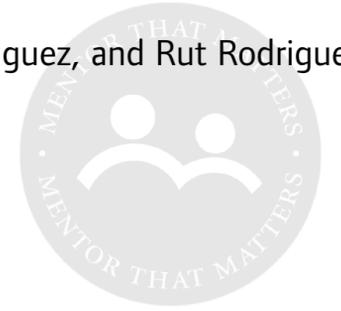
Since I've seen youth do powerful, wonderful things for a long time, I know what young people are capable of doing. However, other people don't necessarily have that experience and they sometimes think young people are dumb. The hardest thing for me to work with is when youth believe the lies told about them.

My best moments are when youth have stepped up and carried the struggle. I mentored a young woman named Lissandra, who was only thirteen years old. She came with some other students to City Hall public hearings downtown, where people were testifying about the gentrification of her neighborhood. My students and I had come to support the residents, but I wasn't going to talk. Lissandra insisted that I talk, and I eventually made some notes and spoke. Lissandra couldn't see herself doing that yet, but she could make sure that her teacher didn't sit there and be quiet. She knew this was important and someone needed to say something. She would not take no for an answer, and, through me, she forced action to be taken.

The thing I really love about youth is that you all don't play. If you don't like something, you let people know. I've learned how strong you all are, and how determined you can be. You all are not boring, like adults can be.

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I Did It for the 'Hood

I got partnered with the YMCA by being a client of theirs when I was still in high school. I got in some deep trouble with the police, and a guy came to holler at me while I was in the hospital. We formed a bond like brotherhood, and I realized, “Hey, this is a positive brother. We came from the same place. He’s doing the same kind of work that I’m interested in doing.” That’s how I became partnered with him and the hospital.

Now I’m a violence prevention coordinator; I do case management and outreach to guys that are identified as at risk. Teenagers are referred to me by a doctor or social worker when they come into the trauma unit at the Cook County Hospital. I talk to them about the damage they are doing to their bodies and organs. I try to set up support resources for them, once they leave the hospital.

When I was young, I did not have anyone to hang out with in my summers or after school. There are no youth centers around here, nowhere to really hang out, so that led me to gangbanging. To this day, I trip out on the fact that the youth that I work with don’t know anything else but living on 26th Street. We have to get out of the ‘hood, check out some other things. We’re so confined to the borderlines within the neighborhood that we don’t explore anything else.

I was seventeen when I started the hunger strike [to establish Little Village Lawndale High School]. I did-

n’t really know what it was about, I just showed up to help out and make some banners. I said to myself, “I’ll do my time for gangbanging in the neighborhood.” It was time to give back a little. And I was tired of my own guys not being able to get their high school diploma because gang boundaries made it impossible for us to make it to the local high school. We needed a new school in the community for everybody to be able to come up and get some education. I didn’t see myself as a mentor—just as somebody from around the ways who could shed a little light on the brothers and sisters in the ‘hood.

I used to love gangbanging, but the hunger strike kind of gave me a different view of things. As I went into college, I started understanding what I wanted to do. I want to work with youth. I probably will become a teacher or some kind of social worker.

This first graduating class will be the first group that went to school and didn’t have to worry about who’s in what gang, or run home after school. The hunger strike lets me walk around the ‘hood. Anybody could tell me anything, but at the end of the day I know that they don’t have anything on me. I got a school built. I did it for the ‘hood.



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Push-Ups for Grandma

I had no idea that I would become a teacher. But when I got out of the military I went to an interview at Hirsch High School for a job teaching JROTC. The high school that I work at, I used to think it was the worst high school in the city.

The mission of JROTC is to motivate young people to be better citizens. I figure if I can reach out to one young person and change their life from what I see, I will be making a difference in some teen's life. I know there is a big difference from my generation and their generation, and sometimes I feel that they're not taking it serious. So nothing surprises me, nothing. They sell drugs, they fight, and they curse like sailors.

In JROTC, I make them do push-ups, I make them stand up in the corner, and I make them stand for 45 minutes for the whole class period. That's the discipline they get. I try to keep my distance from them. But a lot of my students really look up to me, and they come

back to me. I have students who call me Mom. Other students call me Auntie, and I even got one student who calls me Grandma. A lot of them like to hug on me. One kid gave me a flower. So I know they appreciate me.

One student came to me and talked to me about her personal business. She is the number one senior, and she was thinking about running away and dropping out of school because she thought she was pregnant. I told her to talk to her mom. I told her, "Don't drop out of school, and don't do anything crazy." Things have truly changed for teenagers—I never really thought about it before. The majority of them have negative attitudes. I try to get them to think positive.

When they say, "Oh, Sergeant Edmonds!" and they finally get what I'm trying to say, a big smile comes across my face. I know that I taught them something that day.

I try to keep my distance from them. But a lot of my students look up to me, and they come back to me. I have students who call me Mom, and one student calls me Grandma.



Quick Track, Catchy Hook

When I was coming up, I was basically the same as the youth are now, but with a lot more respect and also a lot more hope. Back then, children respected the elders and also respected their self. We had high hopes that things would get better, instead of thinking of the worst.

Now, I work with kids in music programs that are stationed throughout Chicago public schools. I teach children the fundamentals of music, so that they can use it as a tool of expression.

When I started working for this nonprofit organization Street Level, I noticed right away that the kids treated me different than most instructors in the organization. They would feel more free and relaxed around me, which made me feel that they expected more from me. It was a good feeling to be appreciated.

I make the kids that I work with a part of my life. I'm an Underground Chicago artist, and I invite the kids to my shows. I kill two birds at one time: The kids get to spend more time with me, and they also get an insight on the music business. Every child is anxious to make a quick track with a catchy hook, so they can blow up really quick. My job is bringing them down a notch and letting them know how things really work in the industry.

You never know what people are going through, and it is always good to have that figure to look up to,

someone you can seek for guidance and reassurance. Some youth feel better expressing themselves to family members; others would prefer if it would be someone outside of the family. We as humans know a lot of things, but we don't necessarily apply them to our everyday life. Nine out of ten children believe everything they see on the television.

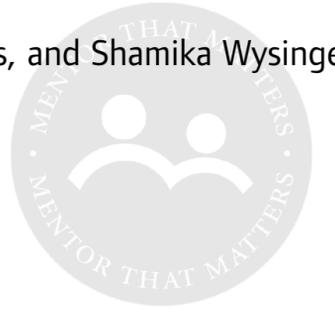
The kids are so creative and smart, but they never take the time to notice their own accomplishments. To them, it's nothing. I think it's because they seek to be good in things everybody else is doing. If they have friends that are good at playing ball, then they want to be good at playing ball.

I always want to keep up with the kids I meet. Every child I meet is creative in their own way and I always see the future in their eye. So I want to make sure that they are on track with pursuing their dreams. It makes me feel like a kid all over again, and it keeps me up on my toes. It also prepares me for being a father, since I have a child on the way.



photo courtesy of Simeon Viltz

Every child is anxious to make a quick track with a catchy hook, so they can blow up quick. My job is letting them know how things really work in the industry.



With the Young Believerz

When I was around your age I was a very independent young lady, but I spent a lot of time with my mom. She showed me how to get people to open up to me. From my interactions with her, I learned how to be independent and strong, how to work hard, to take my education serious, not to settle for anything, and how to be there for people in their time of need. I come from a big family where I have a lot of younger family members who needed someone to steer them into being all they can be. When I was in high school, I had a lot of young girls looking up to me and coming to me for advice.

Two years ago I started overseeing the Young Believerz ministry. I am involved with over twelve young ladies. We have our monthly meetings and I make weekly phone calls to see how things are going with them. I talk and listen to what they have to say and we have monthly outings where we go out to eat, shop and take pictures. It's really hard when you're trying to get them to trust and open up to you. The best moment came when I got one of my teens and her mother to develop a relationship with each other.

Times have changed since I was a teen. We as adults got to sit back and realize that we don't know it all. What was going on when we was teens, it's not going on now. We also have to be willing to listen and

be there for our teens. I have learned how to catch people when they are lying to me. My mom always knew who was lying to her, so I guess that rubbed off onto me.

I always have time for teenagers, no matter what I am doing. I am always there whenever they are in need of anything. I put my personal life on hold to make sure that we have our monthly meetings and that everyone can attend them. Just being able to touch young people's lives, it has touched mine. We have to learn from each other.



We as adults got to sit back and realize that we don't know it all. What was going on when we was teens, it's not going on now. We have to listen and be there.



What Comes from the Heart Reaches the Heart

I can't imagine being eighteen right now. I was church born and bred. I didn't have too many obstacles, or too much stress that teenagers do now. It wasn't like I escaped from it; marijuana was still strong, alcohol was still strong. I tried some of it, but there's nothing I liked. Did that, done that, been there, let it go.

I grew up being a Sunday school teacher and I've always been in contact with youth through church. Young people respond to me as different from most people. I raised twelve children, and all twelve are different from each other. You have to deal with everybody differently. My children are grown now and they are not in trouble with the law, no drugs. Only two had children out of wedlock, and that's because their mother, my sister, passed away, and in order to deal with that, they chose to have a baby. That's something I couldn't stop. We deal with it now. They take care of the children and everything's okay.

I founded an organization for woman who are abused by Christian leaders. The abuse starts when they're young and it grows as they get older. So now I'm about to start a mentor program for ages 8 to 12 and 13 to 18. If I can get to these young people at an early age, maybe they won't grow into abused adults.

Mentoring wasn't a word back then to us. It's basically what we have been doing all along: talking to the young women, talking to the young men, telling them to keep themselves for marriage. You learn a lot

when you listen, even if it's just the minor things that the person is telling you: how they feel neglected or mistreated, or they feel like they're not loved. You can learn a lot just by watching a person's actions, listening to their conversations. You learn from them and then pass it on to someone else.

I've seen it all. There isn't one thing a young person can do or say that will surprise me. At this age and time, they'll do and say anything. This is a new breed of generation and they need a lot more understanding and love than the generation I grew up in. Most of the young ladies have very low self-esteem, and most of the young men are very violent. There are a lot of young girls that are very violent; all they want to do is fight, and I don't clearly understand why.

It's satisfying to know that someone is listening to me. I can tell, because their behavior patterns change. For example, it makes me feel good to see you walk around with a smile on your face. I always saw you with a frown on your face, and it's really nice to see you smile.

I was put here to teach, to empower, and to uplift, and that's what I intend from this day to the day I die—to bring joy to, and to encourage, as many people as I possibly can. A lot of teens I come across are on the wrong path. And I just give love, because what comes from the heart reaches the heart.





Hard Cover

I work with youth at Community TV Network, where I started a TV program called Hard Cover. The youth that come to the after-school program are entirely responsible for producing all the shows that go on Hard Cover. I am involved in training the youth and then helping them with the production of the show. I work with about 35 to 40 students now, and over the past two and a half years I've worked with probably five or six hundred.

I thought I was going to be doing a lot of acting and doing films and theater at the same time. But most of my energy is focused on working with youth. I'm only able to do my creative work maybe 20 hours a week, instead of 40 to 60 hours a week.

The interactions that I have with my students are more informal than at school, where it is teacher and student and a much more defined relationship. I feel more like a big brother figure and less like a teacher or a parent. It's more like co-workers, working together to produce the show.

Sometimes the motivation just isn't there to learn and progress and succeed. I try to relate what I teach to the everyday lives of youth. If they understood how a principle relates to them in everyday life, they might be more interested in learning. The most important thing is to be an independent thinker. To think for yourself and not just take ideas from what the others are saying. To find your own truth that means something to you.

Structure is something that I've tried to use in every program that I run. It is very specific, and within that structure there are areas for creativity and areas to do what youth want. I am surprised how quickly the young people I work with adapt to change. When I introduce a new concept, or something changes, there seems to be some resistance at first. But they are fast learners and they pick up things very quickly, especially with respect to technology.

I've had the opportunity to travel with some students and to win a few awards along the way for the work youth have done here. When they are recognized for it, I do feel a sense of accomplishment. Those are moments that they'll perhaps remember for the rest of their lives.

I learn stuff most every day, and that's a great thing. When youth bring a new idea to the table, something I haven't thought of before, it's a really great feeling for me. That's a great side benefit of the job. They often inspire me to put some of these ideas into my own ideas.



It's more like co-workers, working together to produce the show. Within that structure there are areas for creativity and areas to do what youth want.