

MENTORSHIP PROGRAM TEACHES MALES LIFE SKILLS



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Thursday, 06 February 2014



FORT LAUDERDALE — Last October, Nicholas McKennie gave a co-worker a ride to a fatherhood mentorship program. He asked to stay for the session and what he heard piqued his interest.

"I heard the conversations," the Louisville, Ga., native, said. "I couldn't stop coming back. Three months later, McKennie, 30, joined eight other men in the fifth graduating class of the Fatherhood Mentorship Program run by the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition of Broward County.

Nine of the 14 graduates were present to receive their certificates from the program during the ceremony held at the Joseph C. Carter Park, 1450 W. Sunrise Blvd., Fort Lauderdale.

The program, which started in October 2010, is geared to providing life skills to help fathers and male figures in a child's life. Since 2010, 94 men have graduated from it.

"We are changing lives on a day-to-day basis by encouraging fatherhood involvement," said Michelle Reese, executive director of Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies of Broward County. "[Fathers] play a significant role in children's lives." Reese said the mentorship program is dedicated to helping lower the infant mortality rate in the black community. A 2010 Fetal Infant Mortality Review study found that the fetal/infant mortality rate for blacks was the highest of any ethnic group in Broward County. The study was led by Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies of Broward County, with the help of the Broward County Medical Association.

Samuel Brown, program manager, said participants select three goals they want to complete by the end of the 12-week session. The goals vary from finding stable employment to being a better father figure for their families. Each participant is partnered with a mentor.

"All of the fathers have completed goals," Brown said. "Some fathers complete all of their goals."

Katamu Darling, 37, of Pompano Beach, McKennie's wife of more than two years, said she has seen a change in how he interacts with her son Christopher Mason.

"He has enhanced in most areas," Darling said. "I have two sons. My first son didn't have a father figure but my second son has a father figure."

Christopher, 9, agreed. "He takes his time off to do stuff with me," he said. Brown said it is important to provide a network for men to come together. "They understand that other men are going through the same struggles," he said. David Richard, 27, valedictorian of the class that graduated on Jan. 22, said his mentor, Willie Holmes, was a big help.

"He told me that he was there for the long haul," Richard said. "We did everything together. He was a father-figure. He showed me how to be a better man."

Some of the mentors are former graduates, such as Fred Brown, 51, of Fort Lauderdale, who graduated in November 2011. He said the lessons he learned helped him keep his youngest son from falling victim to negative influences.

"I was interested in helping other fathers in the same situation," Brown said. "I try to give because I didn't want to see my brother's kids lost to the streets."

Cynthia Holmes, a member of Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition of Broward County for six years, helped develop the program. After early struggles to secure financial support, the initiative now gets funding from the Susan B. Anthony Foundation, the Children's Services Council of Broward County and the Jim Moran Foundation. "Without them, the program would be dormant," said Holmes.

Picture above

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TAKING THE PLEDGE: From left, Evans Sanon Sr. and son Evans Jr., David Richard and son D'Cory and Nicholas McKennie take the fatherhood pledge during the graduation ceremony of the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition of Broward County Fatherhood Mentorship Program.