

one on one

IN THE BRICK WALL at the corner of Bennett Street in Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood is a mural of young black faces staring, unblinkingly, at the passing traffic. "R.I.P. Javon Thompson. R.I.P. Robin Little. R.I.P. Derrick Taylor. R.I.P. Nelco Dorsey," reads the inscription. "Gone But Not Forgotten."

Four blocks away, 13-year-old Demond Jackson, in a day-glo safety vest, works with other volunteers on a litter cleanup crew. He's there at the behest of a mentor — a young black man who hopes to separate Demond from the litany of loss that pervades his community.

The man Demond respectfully calls "Mr. Kyle" won't transfer him from his school or move him away from family. He has simply committed to be involved in the boy's life. As part of a patient, personal, one-on-one effort to bring role models and high expectations to young African Americans, Kyle Henderson has pledged through Mount Ararat Baptist Church to be a volunteer mentor to the youth for the next three years.



Demond Jackson, 13, of Pittsburgh's Lincoln-Lemington neighborhood, and his mentor, Kyle Henderson, 26, of Beechview, share a few laughs during a building-painting project at Mount Ararat Baptist Church in East Liberty.

Mount Ararat Baptist Church offers a variety of activities for local youth, with the church's Community Activity Center providing a safe environment for the youngsters to meet. Above, mentor Alvin Jones, 26, leads a discussion on community responsibility. Below left, Jamie Lopez, 15, right foreground; Khadij Burton Crable, 12, center; and Lamont Nichols, 12, far left, play an educational game in the center's computer lab. Below right, the Rev. Robert James, 33, uses a mirror to teach a lesson about self-image during a session on spiritual values. Shown in the mirror is Tylor Banks, 13.

Today, Demond has the slight stature, oversized sneakers and braces of a young man about to spring into adulthood. In 13 years, he'll be the age of his mentor. But matching Henderson's achievements—a high school basketball career, a college degree and real estate investments—will be tougher for him to learn, growing up without his father in one of Pittsburgh's bleakest East End neighborhoods.

How does a Demond Jackson become a Kyle Henderson? For young black men at risk, new answers to that question are desperately required.

Pittsburgh's homicide and dropout rates reveal the stakes. In the city's six toughest neighborhoods, black men ages 15 to 30 are 167 times more likely to be murdered than the national average of 5.7 per 100,000 population. More than 23 percent of black Pittsburghers lack a high school diploma.

Nationally, black men are seven times more likely than whites to be incarcerated, and receive longer prison sentences. Their children inherit that risk. Without intervention, 70 percent are likely to enter the prison system themselves.

The absence of fathers makes young black men vulnerable to the examples of the street.

But volunteers from Mount Ararat, a mainstay in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood, offer a different model, insisting that one positive, patient adult can steer one child safely through the turbulent teens.

"Every day I see young men and women who run afoul of the law," says mentor Alex Wilson, who recently retired after 27 years on the staff of Shuman Center. The juvenile detention facility is less than a mile from Mount Ararat, where Wilson has been a member for 16 years. "Unfortunately, a lot of these boys have had people come in and out of their lives. They see adults who've failed [them] again and again. I say, you want to be consistent." For the past five years, Wilson has practiced what his church preaches through steadfast, low-key counsel to Roderick Gaston, now 15.

Volunteers like Henderson and Wilson—when they can be found—are achieving results that more ambitious and expensive programs have only attempted. Boys and girls with

mentors in their lives are 46 percent less likely to begin using drugs. They're 33 percent less likely to hit someone. Eighty-six percent go on to higher education.

Those results are causing foundation officers and youth workers to look at humble mentoring with new respect and to support it as a critical tool that can help children succeed in school and life. Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, who has ensured \$100 million a year in funding for mentoring nationwide, continues to crusade for youth crime prevention efforts to incorporate mentoring as a proven strategy. Mentoring programs in southwestern Pennsylvania now reach more than 2,000 children, a 400 percent increase since 1998. Still, the Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern Pennsylvania estimates that more than 1,000 children are currently waiting for adult volunteers.

"There are so many changes in our world," says Colleen Fedor, executive director of the umbrella group that helps recruit and train volunteers for mentoring programs throughout the region. "There's less extended family. People move out of neighborhoods. There's a loss of those natural relationships, where you know my uncle, or you work with my brother."

One institution hasn't budged: churches. "There are churches in every community," says Fedor. With pews full of motivated volunteers, faith-based initiatives are getting more attention and funding, at both the national and the local level. The Mentoring Partnership reports that 541 volunteers from 17 local congregations donate time through its 100 member groups. At Mount Ararat, a core of about 50 men is working with sixth- to eighth-grade boys.

The Endowments has awarded the partnership \$373,500 in support since its founding in 1995. The foundation also gave a \$100,000 grant to the Mount Ararat program this spring as part of the Endowments' Pathways to Educational Excellence initiative. The effort supports programs and services that can help improve academic performance among African-American and other students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, particularly those attending the district's restructured schools known as accelerated learning academies.



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Encouraged by turnarounds in the behavior and performance of mentored students, schools are welcoming their new adult friends. In an unusually open collaboration, the Pittsburgh school district has reached out to programs like the one at Mount Ararat.

“This is an effort that needs human capital as much as funding,” says Carmen Anderson, an officer in the Endowments’ Children, Youth & Families Program. “Here’s where the faith community comes in. Traditional institutions can’t get the job done alone. We need creative approaches within the communities where children live.”

Playing One-on-One

When Wilson met Roderick at age 11, he could tell two things: The boy loved to laugh and joke, and he didn’t like to read. “Well, I’m always going to a bookstore,” says Wilson with a chuckle. “And his teachers [at Reizenstein Middle School] told me it was an area where he needed practice. So I told him, I’m going to insist—I want to hear you read aloud. And his reading improved. Now, we go to a movie, we go to the library—and we always eat. It’s part of this deal here, reading or library. This is not about fun, fun, fun. And I’ll be his mentor for as long as he wants.”

In the hallway of Lincoln Intermediate School, full of boisterous shouts and electronic class bells, Henderson stands out. The quiet, confident 26-year-old has been showing up a lot here this year, usually in a dark suit and tie, as he begins two new tasks: mentoring Demond and managing Mount Ararat’s mentoring program.

Demond’s latest report card “wasn’t too stellar,” says Henderson calmly. “We’re having some trouble with social studies.” The first-person plural pronoun emphasizes the responsibility Henderson takes for his young charge.

“He’s taught me that I have to make good choices,” says the seventh-grade soccer player. A ready example occurs to him: “like studying for world cultures.”

After returning to his office, Henderson leans back from his keyboard as he reflects on those who helped him along the road to manhood. “My mentors? First and foremost, my father. In college, Pastor Melvin Jenkins. Most recently, it’s been Greg

Spencer [a retired Pittsburgh utilities executive]. I was one of the fortunate few who grew up with a father and mother. I had structure and discipline. In college, I realized how much was invested in me. It’s made me humble.”

The Promise

Through several generations of East Liberty’s history, from prosperity to ruin to painstaking renewal, century-old Mount Ararat Baptist Church has provided a faithful anchor. To neighbors in need, it puts that faith into action.

On a Sunday morning, the spacious sanctuary thumps with percussion, rings with the harmonies of 50 scarlet-clad musicians and echoes with 500 joyful worshippers at each of the four morning services. On Saturday mornings, the church’s social service ministries provide another kind of heartbeat. In the church’s community center, volunteers are packing meals for shut-ins, while others supervise the monthly food and clothing banks. A baseball team warms up. And under Henderson’s watchful eye, Demond is among two dozen youngsters combing vacant lots for a spring cleanup.

Dozens of programs, from robotics classes to cancer screenings, make the church a healthy heart for the neighborhood around Paulson Street. While the church has 9,000 members, it reaches thousands more through its Community Activities Center.

Mount Ararat’s mentoring program began in 2002, aided by a federal Department of Education grant to support faith-based initiatives. Since that grant expired in 2005, the program has survived mainly on faith—and on the tithe of its offerings that the church directs to community projects.

The Endowments’ latest grant will help the mentoring program expand some 60 percent.

“In the long term, youth need quality education, opportunities for employment, guidance regarding risk behavior and a path for reaching their potential. This does not happen without the support of caring, committed adults,” says Anderson. “The men from the church serving as mentors have made a commitment to make a difference. The program is building a solid foundation and focusing on quality so that the boys will have a positive, meaningful experience.”

Mentoring methods

A new name for a time-honored idea, mentoring involves passing on to youth the wisdom that comes with age. But as communities evolve, so do the institutions that foster that knowledge.

A positive, structured relationship between a caring adult and a young person can take place in a neighborhood, a school, a workplace or a church. The form of that relationship varies according to the time, temperament and needs of those involved. The 100 members of the local Mentoring Partnership offer several different examples:

At Colfax School in Pittsburgh, academic achievement gets a boost through senior literacy volunteers from the Oasis program, which offers onsite tutors.

Fifteen students from Rooney Middle School have become Health Rangers, getting a firsthand look at health careers from Allegheny General Hospital mentors in both clinical and non-clinical departments.

Busy professionals volunteer by using their keyboards through e-Mentoring, a program of the workforce development agency Smart Futures. More than 130 mentors exchange career advice in e-mails with students. Smart Futures controls and archives the communications, masking e-mail addresses to ensure online safety.

Making a Match

Funding from the Endowments and other foundations supports the Mentoring Partnership's work in helping with the background clearances and training programs that volunteers must pass. The funding also is used for ad campaigns that urge adults to "eliminate the wait" for mentors. Luring overscheduled adults to find time for the youngsters is a challenge, says its executive director.

"We used to think of mentoring on the Big Brothers model: very structured, for an hour a week for a year," says Fedor. "That is the ideal. But we need to be inclusive." She approves of the Mount Ararat solution to the time crunch. The program groups adults and kids in clusters of three adults to five children, as well as the traditional one-on-one pairing. The model lets adults juggle work and family commitments and still join their mentees for one-to-one and group programs, like a recent dinner and alumni presentation at the University of Pittsburgh.

Denise Williams, Henderson's boss at the Mount Ararat Community Activities Center, likens its high-energy September mentoring kickoff to speed dating. It's an evening of rapid-fire introductions among middle-schoolers and adult men that

launches their relationship in a casual way. The common denominator of the Mount Ararat volunteers, says Williams simply, is that "they are first and foremost Christian men."

Henderson explains that his Bible study group drew him into the mentoring ideal, so much so that he left a position as a grant writer for another community youth center to run Mount Ararat's mentoring program. "They are all college grads, young men with a passion to help youth," he says. "They inspired me."

The church's charismatic pastor used his pulpit to call for mentoring volunteers. The Rev. William Curtis, 40, who has seen his congregation explode from 400 members since becoming pastor in 1997, still remembers the mentor who set his path to the ministry.

"John Leon Lewis," he intones with a smile. The Baltimore junior high school music teacher enlisted young Curtis in a gospel choir, which led to his joining the Baptist church and meeting his wife.

Four years ago, Curtis was invited by a local educator to visit Reizenstein Middle School, which served the church neighborhood. He left the school shaken.

"I was shocked at Reizenstein," he says frankly. "It was nothing like my experience of school. There was no youthful innocence. There was no respect for teachers and peers." In the discussions that followed, school officials confirmed that boys faced the most challenges in the community and needed immediate attention.

"So we said, let's adopt Reizenstein," Curtis recalls. "We're biting off a piece of the elephant: young African-American men at risk." Mentoring, he says, "gives us a natural inroad to the schools. Kids find programs here, and the word spreads: This is a safe place to go."

Counselors suggested students whose academic records, attendance and behavior problems waved red flags. Carefully working to observe as much confidentiality as possible, Mount Ararat staff shuttled among school administrators, parents and volunteers to make the matches.

At the end of its three-year federal grant, church staff evaluated its charges' school performance and found significant improvement. Attendance was better; the number of unexcused absences was reduced by 47 percent. Students' self-concepts had



Mentor Kevin Ford, top, 54, shows middle-school student William Taylor how to properly “cut corners” while painting walls at Mount Ararat Baptist Church. Bottom: It’s not all work and no play for youth at Mount Ararat. Recreational activities also are available, like this basketball game during the church’s Activity Night. Playing on the court from left are Jamie Lopez, 15; Lenny Hilton, 13; and Shaquille Smith, 14.

risen 30 percent as measured by Piers-Harris surveys. Grade point averages were 2 percent higher than the district median.

But as the program began to yield measurable results, the ground beneath it shifted. In a reorganization of the school district, Reizenstein was closed, and, last September, its population was separated into three smaller middle schools. For children like Demond, who would lose familiar teachers and friends, bonds with their mentors became more important.

“Mount Ararat has traveled with the child. They are even more responsible for them now,” says Virginia Hill, co-principal of one of the three schools that received Reizenstein students. The slender, unflappable Faison Intermediate School leader and Mount Ararat member retreats briefly into her narrow office to review the challenges facing Faison children.

Of the 380 children enrolled at Faison, 375 are African American. Ninety-nine percent qualify for free school meals. Almost a third need special education services. “So many of our children need a consistent, positive adult in their lives,” she says. “Mentoring provides the missing component.”

Faison offers speech and language services, after-school programs, gang-free schools and school safety zone initiatives, and sports programs. Also operating onsite programs at the school are Family Links, an organization that provides mental health, mental retardation and drug treatment services, and the local YWCA and YMCA. To provide out-of-school emotional support for children, however, Hill relies on three volunteer mentoring programs, all of them church-based. Still, half the students in the school do not have mentors and would benefit from the relationships.

“It would be wonderful to get more dedicated people,” she says with a sigh. “And it’s the entire family that needs care.”

Measuring Results

To attract volunteers, train them and evaluate program results, the local mentoring organization leans heavily on the National Mentoring Partnership. Public service campaigns on network TV urge volunteers to “Share What You Know.” Billboards remind adults of the children who are waiting. A 10-point evaluation checklist offers standards for nonprofits to use, and

research on the long-term results of mentoring is analyzed and disseminated.

“In local assessments, we’re good on program development and matching,” notes Fedor of a recent audit of mentoring groups. “Over 79 percent of our organizations meet eight of those goals, and we’re thrilled with that. We have excellent program development and matching processes. On other tasks that are not as fun—like closure and evaluation—we need to improve.”

Evaluation remains an important focus for Endowments staff members who want to know what works and why.

“There’s no one single approach. We believe that this community/school partnership is promising and has many possible benefits,” observes Anderson. “The church has a long history of outreach and is well known in the community. [Church members] have taken on the challenge of addressing the needs of boys who in many instances don’t have strong male role models in their lives. The men serving as mentors are filling an important void that may help the boys with identity formation, improve school performance or save a life.”

Anderson believes that African Americans who have achieved stable lives despite adversity may yield insights into how children, particularly boys, can develop resiliency. The ability to rebound from difficult experiences is a vital component of an Endowments initiative to counter the sobering statistics on African-American males in the Pittsburgh region.

“What we need to know is, are there evidence-based approaches based on those who beat the odds?” says Anderson. “Most studies and strategies focus on the problem side of the equation, not the solution side. It may be useful to understand what’s different about those individuals.” The Endowments plans to commission national research on this issue this year.

As research and evaluation continue, so does the patient commitment of individual mentors. And, the mentor waiting list continues to grow.

On Homewood’s Bennett Street, a poem painted alongside the faces of the “Rest in Peace” mural poses a brutal question: “Why did you not allow me to bloom? I was a rose by another name.” *h*