

Presence of Mentoring Norfolk's Youth

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Camille Brown, a 19 year old Virginia Beach native and 2006 graduate of Norview High School recalls seeing many high school guys who would rather skip class or sell drugs to get a new pair of Jordan's rather than go to class and get an education; they were "very complacent with their education and it wasn't much of a priority" she said. Brown is a witness to students not doing their work or giving up on plans to graduate because they felt as though they did not have the kind of money to go to college. She stated that some preferred to work at McDonalds all their life, as long as they could sport the latest gear and the most expensive shoes.

Lee Davenport, the academic advisor of Norview High School, believes "what we [her and other school officials] do is PR, selling what we have to offer," to get the students aware and interested. Like Brown, Davenport observes students who "will settle for doing nothing" because they "think it's the end." When students do not see the need to be in school or strive for academic success, Davenport does all she can to get them to see the bigger picture of life. Davenport believes that the first step in taking action begins in freshman year students.

While talking about those students that get lost and lose their focus, Davenport stated "if you can't get them out of ninth grade, that's where you lose them". Davenport considers it to be an educational sweep that incoming students experience when adjusting to the many classes, the social life, and the homework load. If the students cannot overcome this educational sweep, there is a great chance they will be lost in the system and it is often hard to get back on their feet.

Mentoring in the Norfolk community has been in existence for a long time and according to the Norfolk Public School's Performance Reports, they have been on a rise. In fact, Granby High School calculated a total of 409 volunteer hours by parents and community members in the school year of 2003-2004 and 490 volunteer hours in the 2004-2005 school year. This statistic proves that Big Brother/Big Sister, the YMCA, business partnerships, school-to-school programs, and other small mentorships in Norfolk have been hard at work trying to make a difference in young people. But the question that we posed to others and ourselves is a tricky one, have mentorships in our Norfolk schools made a difference that is visible to our community?

In the fall of 2004, when we first became a part of the Hampton Road's community, we would not have been convinced that mentorship programs were active. As new students to Old Dominion, we were disturbed by the conditions of the neighborhoods; trash in the streets, residences with boarded-up windows, and adults hanging out on the corners. However, we were more alarmed at seeing first-hand the state of the children. One afternoon as Charron was on an errand, she saw a group of high school students walking towards a busy two way street, away from their school. In fact, Charron has often seen young children that seem to be middle school aged walking on the streets during the noonday; leading her to wonder why these children are not in school.

After a year, we realized that many children needed guidance. With a passion to make a change in the community, we decided to join a new campus organization -- to Respect Unite Support and Teach (T.R.U.S.T.), a group that focused on the well being of Norfolk's community. In T.R.U.S.T. we both were able to work with a child from

Larchmont Elementary. As we began to develop a relationship with our mentees we realized that these children just needed a friend and a push to encourage them to do well in school and as a human being.

Obviously there are voids or obstacles in these children's lives that need to be filled or nurtured, which is where mentoring programs are thought to be a great help. At Larchmont Elementary, mentoring programs focus on a number of issues; academics, self esteem, strengths, gifts, organization skills, motivation, social skills, and goal setting. According to Anita Thornton, a middle aged Larchmont Elementary School teacher and the site coordinator for mentoring programs, "these children need someone who will show them they care." The passion for her job and her devotion to the students of Larchmont are quite apparent. Throughout our interview, many times Thornton mentioned her "mother" relationship with the students. Thornton acknowledges that some children do not have a mother as a positive role model, but implies that she, as much as possible, offers a motherly figure. Though this is Thornton's first year as the site coordinator, she has been a "mother" for 13 years at Larchmont. She has become an expert by experience when it comes to at-risk children.

To avoid a great number of students from getting lost in the "system," Norview High has developed the Leadership Program. This program is offered to all freshman students and is a way for students to find their talents and get a sense of belonging to something other than the vast high school. Thornton stressed that mentoring programs are not just for the child with behavior problems or having difficulties reading, it can help anyone. Mentoring is a way to improve, develop, change, and simply bring out the best; a shy student learns to interact with others, or an artistic student learns to apply their talents

to school. Among the Leadership Program, there is the music, science engineering, ROTC, and other programs where students can develop a close relationship with teachers and other students. The benefit is that when a student begins to slip, a teacher is more likely to notice and feel confident in helping out.

At the School of International Studies at Meadowbrook Middle School more internal mentoring is utilized than community partnership. Most of the internal mentoring and tutoring are provided by school officials and through connections with other schools. As a school with a focus on international studies and cultural differences, Meadowbrook has three program studies that students can choose from -- world language and culture, military science, or both. Because Meadowbrook requires more from their students and focuses on more than the simply reading, writing, and arithmetic, some students may have a hard time keeping the required G.P.A of a 3.0.

To prevent grade failures and poor grades, Meadowbrook has a program that pairs each teacher up with at least one student. By the looks of the Performance Report this program is effective; showing that in the 2004-2005 school year 100% seventh graders were promoted and 99% eighth graders were promoted. In fact, as I waited to start our interview, I saw a couple of students walk out of Gibson's office. Later Gibson pointed out that the students were her new mentees. At first, the students had no clue why they were there and seemed a bit wary. But as Gibson explained the purpose of their lunch and meetings, the students seem to loosen up and appeared to be more comfortable with the idea of having a mentor.

Thornton is a strong believer that mentoring programs are very effective in Larchmont. According to the 2004 to 2005 year Performance Report for Larchmont, each

grade has a higher percentage rate for grade level promotions, with a small decrease in grade four. As more volunteers come into Larchmont, the more lives are affected and touched with love. So far, Larchmont has mentor volunteers from the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) sponsors who help with the after school Homework Club, Old Dominion's ROTC, T.R.U.S.T., Big Brother Big Sister of the South Hampton Roads, various college organizations and reading mentors. Although each focuses differently on self-development, they all aim towards the same goal -- improving a child's perspective on life. If a child has an academic problem, than an academic program helps that child with becoming focused and ensuring them that nothing is impossible or out of reach. Whereas, a child that deals with a home dilemma may find better help with a self-help or image program. This program will focus more on the child's personal needs with self-esteem and hope to turn the negative into a positive.

Because Davenport works with a different age group compared to Thornton, Davenport strives to help the students understand that what they are doing today will be their future tomorrow. As an active counselor looking for early signs of problems, Davenport noticed that the majority of the African American males enrolled in Norview High were not productive, involved and are "the most vulnerable demographic". Davenport expressed that many of the youth feel that after high school "it's the end". One of the causes of this is due to young people staying in a certain apathetic mentality, one that has been present for quite some time and "starts in elementary school" as Brown put it.

Davenport says that one day while walking past a room, she noticed Jamaal (pseudonym) an African American male student in his honors biology class. While

Davenport knew that Jamaal could handle the workload, she also saw a struggle in his grades. Pondering on the situation, Davenport realized that Jamaal was not having a hard time because of his work, but because he had no one he could relate to in his class. Thus a group called Young Gifted and Black (YGB) was established as a way to bring the African American males of Norview together and be a support group. After seven years, Y.G.B. has changed its name to the Dodson Scholars, has a class available for African American males, maintains entry criteria, offers scholarships, and has had 21 of its member graduate with a 3.0 G.P.A of higher.

As Davenport spoke about the purpose and impact of Dodson Scholars she showed much respect and support. In fact, as she talked there was one point when she had to pause to prevent from crying. Davenport admitted that some of the gentlemen had no idea why they were in the group and that “they really don’t get it”. Yet by the time they graduate and the gentlemen have experienced high school as a Dodson Scholar, they will move on to be successful African American males.

However before success, many of Norfolk’s children live in homes with single, overworked parents, all kinds of abuse; they witness drug deals, street violence or some kind of crime in their neighborhood. These are personal problems, following each student to school every day and affecting many aspects of their life; like their decision making, leaning abilities, behavior, and social skills. Davenport describes Norview as a “beacon of light” which shines through the drug-oriented neighborhoods. With this “beacon of light”, Norview hopes that students can find refuge in the school and learn there is more past the streets. Fortunately for elementary schools such as Larchmont, the students are young and have naïve minds; which helps teachers and school officials tell

when there is trouble or help is needed. When a child is suffering from a problem or is having a personal problem, often times they are capable of sharing them with their teacher; and in some cases, they seek a friend to share their thoughts with.

Davenport shared another story about helping a former student of Norview High, Crystal (pseudonym), get into a technical school in Norfolk. Davenport said that Crystal's father was on dialysis, had younger siblings, her mother worked nonstop, and she always had an attitude that showed she did not care. Davenport recalled the constant battles and arguments she had with Crystal about her grades and behavior. However, when Crystal was promoted to the next grade and given a new advisor, she continued to drop by Davenport's office. This was a sign to Davenport that because she put up a fight with Crystal, Crystal knew she had someone who cared. In fact, by her senior year Crystal admitted her desires to go on to a technical school but knew that her chances would be low. Crystal's background was not pretty; her older sisters barely graduated, she had a bad representation for having an attitude, her attendance was poor, and her grades were low. Yet Davenport saw the potential of Crystal and helped her write an essay about her life's situations and her ambitions as a student.

Sometimes, students will not seek help as Crystal did, but it is up to the teacher to notice the tell tale signs students display; such as grades beginning to drop or insufficient grade averages, poor class participation and interaction, and or a destructive attitude. Students may display these signs through- not putting effort in their work, initiating classroom quarrel, or making negative comments about their outlook on life. Though it is hard work for many teachers, such students are sometimes the primary purpose of choosing a career in education.

However, there is always a bad apple in the bunch; some teachers who have lost their enthusiasm or others that do not have patience for students that need special attention. Butler states that “teachers wait until the problem has become an issue” instead of being active in the early signs of the problem. According to Derrick Butler, a 22-year-old native of Norfolk and a graduate of Norview High School and current student of Norfolk State University, the students are not pushed enough. Butler stated that it seems like teachers let students get away with a lot of stuff. He also said that “they prepare [the course work] like the students are just going to get by,” they don’t prepare with expectations for the best. In fact Butler admitted that in high school he was not interested in school and the only reason he went to college was because of his parents’ expectations and a scholarship.

It is not only important to have teachers that care, but also parents with high expectations for their children, as Butler’s parents did. Parent involvement is one program and service that both Meadowbrook Middle School and Larchmont Elementary offer for their students. Though implemented in different ways, both the principal of Meadowbrook Middle, Lynnell Gibson, and Thornton finds it imperative to get parents as involved in and aware of what is going on in their child(ren)’s life. Thornton, being the new site coordinator, has started a new social called “The Kick Off”, which includes an initial meeting between the mentees, parents and mentors. During this social, Thornton hopes to set the tone and make all expectations of the program clear. To offer the understanding and benefits of the mentoring program, Thornton will also be showing the new movie “Akeela and the Bee”. This is a movie that both Thornton and Davenport,

who once was an elementary school guidance counselor, agree exemplifies a true purpose and relationship between a mentor and mentee.

However when I spoke with two Norfolk parents, Leana (pseudonym) a young mother of a Lake Taylor Middle student and Joyce (pseudonym) the mother of twins attending Bayview Elementary School, the PTA meetings were the only known way for parents to become involved. Yet, they had no idea when these meetings took place, simply that they were once a month. Leana did know, however, that there as program called After the Bell which allowed students to be tutored by teachers. Both parents stated that they did not know of any other form parental involvement in the schools, but affirmed that they attended their child(ren)'s parent teacher conferences and took part in any activities they knew of. Perhaps schools had these programs but simply were using the wrong avenues in publicizing them.

Butler also stated that his parents would only attend the parent teacher conferences, when held and show support in his extra-curricular activities. While not being as active in the schools, Butler made it clear that his parents were supportive and looked out for his best interest. On the other hand, some students do not have parents such as Leana or Joyce that show time and interest in their children. Brown said that some parents are incapable of taking care of their children. This serves as a problem because Brown also says that "it all comes down on the parents."

To engage parents at Meadowbrook, workshops and meetings are developed. Each student's parent(s) are mandated to attend at number of workshops during the school year. For Gibson and Evelyn Lee, Meadowbrook's school counselor, these workshops are important in keeping parents updated and aware. During these workshops,

parents are introduced to the student's curriculum, ways to getting involved, methods to help their child(ren) study, and other ways to support their child(ren). Understanding that some parents work more than a normal nine to five job and have other affairs to tend to, Meadowbrook makes it possible that these parents can set up a meeting with the school counselor to go over what was discussed in the workshop. Either way, Meadowbrook makes certain that the students reach their potential as positive "citizens of the world" and the parents are as active as possible in the development of their child(ren)'s education.

After Lamin went through his experience last year with his mentee, Antonio (pseudonym), he realized that he did make an impact in a life. He told Antonio that even though he had made mistakes in the past, he still has a chance at life and a good education. Before Antonio graduated from elementary school last year, he told Lamin that he would be moving away from the area. All Lamin could think of was how he wasn't going to be able to give him advice anymore and if he would have someone to mentor him since he wasn't going to be there. Lamin had no idea whether or not he would turn out to be a successful and respectable student or end up down the wrong path, but he hoped for the best in Antonio's future.

Either way, a child's life is affected or changed daily either by local volunteers, internal school programs, external partnerships, or parent workshops. Norfolk's community and the estimated percentages that show success may not illustrate improvements or active mentoring programs, but if you go into the schools you can see changed lives and feel the love that they have received. Thornton can proudly say she will get to see some of her very first students of Larchmont Elementary graduate from high school and Davenport can testify to Crystal's acceptance into the technical school

she wanted to attend. As Davenport said, not every child will be saved and it takes one child at a time, but that does not mean there is no hope. “It’s the fact that you care,” says Thornton that gives hope to children and makes a difference in their future.