

CITYWIDE

The Boston Globe

Hurt feelings, and then hugs

Retreat puts students on path to leadership

By Leslie Talmadge, Globe Correspondent | October 14, 2007

It was a temperate week in mid-August but inside the Rolling Ridge Conference Center, things were getting hot. Ugly words were exchanged; feelings were hurt.

From the pain, the city's next generation of leaders may emerge.

At least that's the hope of the Boston Center for Community and Justice. The organization, which aims to develop student leaders who will promote social justice in their schools and communities, brought together a diverse group of about 50 students from Boston public and private high schools for a retreat at the North Andover center.

But to develop the leadership skills that will help them advocate for change, the teenagers first needed to open their minds.

"We start with the self," said Todd Fry, executive director of the Boston organization. "Our approach hinges on the belief that if we want to breed a deep commitment to socially responsible leadership, we have to give people the opportunity to look pretty deeply at themselves."

The Leadership Initiative program "is not a moral reasoning symposium," said Peter McCaffery, head of student support at Boston Arts Academy, which sends students there each year. Instead, he said, it resembles "a marriage between political science and sociology with therapy."

Students grapple with issues such as race, sexual orientation, and stereotypes, and are asked questions such as, "If you feel empowered, are you aware of how power is misused? If you don't feel empowered, talk about your personal experience about that," McCaffery said.

"By Wednesday, they're ready to melt down," McCaffery said. "By Thursday and Friday, they've found some common ground, resolved major issues and divisions between them, and developed friendships as a result."

The training is paying off already for participants in last summer's session.

As part of a project they developed at the Leadership Initiative, Jay Cottle and two others at the Boston Arts Academy, Darnell Hardin and George Om, plan to start an after-school program at the academy. They want to provide tutoring and offer student clubs such as a poetry group, improvisation and dance troupes, and social justice and environmental clubs.

But first, the young men want to train about 15 peer leaders to advise students on academic and emotional issues and help with the after-school initiative, said Cottle, whose parents were born in Barbados. The school's Leadership and Student Support teams and the Boston Center for Community and Justice will help them launch the programs.

"My esteem before" the summer program, Cottle said, "was never constant and never matched those around me." He added that he now feels more relaxed and poised. "I'm really taking the initiative to become a leader."

The program, McCaffery said, is effective not only for students who have already demonstrated leadership skills, it can also be "transformative" for students who are struggling or feel isolated.

Sixteen-year-old Jamesha Stokes, a popular African-American sophomore at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester, "was at the border of going one direction or another, depending on her environment and the kids she was hanging out with," according to an assistant headmaster, Amilcar Silva.

Since September 2006, Stokes said, her attitude - and her grades - have improved. Now, she said, she wants to stay on top of her "p's and q's in school" and become a social worker or a psychologist.

Stokes and two other Burke students, junior Yong Young, 16, and senior Jose Machado, 18, each received \$1,000 scholarships to attend the leadership training. The scholarships were given in honor of Ernesto "Tito" Whittington, a Boston police detective who "epitomized public service," in the words of his colleagues.

Whittington, who died of liver disease last year, spent his career trying to combat youth violence. He worked on the Youth Violence Strike Force and in the Police Department's school unit. (In the 1990s, he was assigned as a police officer at Burke, according to school officials.)

The Tito Whittington Leadership Scholars Award was started by graduates who attended the justice center's adult leadership program with Whittington in 1998.

Three students from Burke will continue to receive scholarships to attend the high school program into the future.

"Teenagers are grappling with their place in the world, their mission," said Alexander Phillips, a former Burke assistant headmaster who helped select the scholarship recipients.

"There's this powerful moral core that exists in our kids," he added. "If we can figure out more ways to tap into that moral core, we can keep more kids in schools and do better in the long run."

Machado, who moved to Dorchester from Cape Verde six years ago and works at a Stop & Shop 20 hours a week, wants to "help prevent people from going to the streets and doing drugs." He said the weeklong retreat changed him.

"I learned we shouldn't judge people by what we see, but the way they act." He also said he has become more respectful toward young women.

Young, whose parents escaped the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, said he was the only Asian-American student in his middle school. "The one thing I've experienced is racism," said Young, who wants to join the Marines.

Young said he feels "pretty lonely" at Burke, while at the leadership program in North Andover "within two days everyone was so friendly with each other. It was as if we'd known each other for years."

Cottle, recently elected to serve as program manager of the justice center's Youth Council, cautioned that the name of the program, the Leadership Initiative, "sounds daunting, stuffy and conference-y." But, he said, "It's really a spellbinding experience that opens you up to the world around you, and to people you've never met that you'll love for a lifetime. It helps you become a better person, a better leader."

To find out more about the Leadership Initiative, contact Nancy Tom at the Boston Center for Community and Justice at ntom@bostonccj.org. To contribute to the Tito Whittington Leadership Scholars Fund, contact Ruben Orduna at the Boston Foundation at ruben.orduna@tbf.org. ■