

volunteer

IN THIS ISSUE

Peer Connections Add to Students' Support System

For many students, just knowing someone cares and is rooting for them makes all the difference in the effort they put forth. Time and time again, students spotlighted in this newsletter have attributed their success to teachers or administrators--the interest they showed and how much they believed in them. The stories here touch on the same idea only at a peer-to-peer level. They demonstrate how relationships between students can add another powerful layer of support, one that can change attitudes and outcomes.

Eureka Students Come Together To Support One Another

By Peggy Magee

If you're a Beatles fan, you probably remember these lyrics from that popular song they released in 1968: "Oh I get by with a little help from my friends" and "Gonna try with a little help from my friends."

The Fellowship of Young Men (FYM), a peer mentoring program for VICC participants at Rockwood's Eureka High School, puts into action the dynamic force of personal connections by encouraging underclassmen to seek help and advice from older students. It was organized last spring at the request of a senior who desired to help his ninth grade counterparts whose transition to high school mirrored his own.

That young man and the others who jumped in to start FYM have since graduated but one mentor was junior Leon Hale, who has helped carry the program over to this school year. Leon is joined by a handful of junior class mentors who, in turn, serve as the "link" for continuing the program into next school year.

Leon, who plans to join a college nursing program next fall, explains the purpose of FYM by conceding that he and some of the other mentors encountered challenges and missteps in their

early years of high school. Now older and wiser, they want to prevent other VICC participants from making the same mistakes. Every two weeks, the half dozen mentors meet with the younger students (sometimes six; other times as many as 12) over their mutual lunch hours. The program has been talked up to the younger students and the free pizza in the private meeting space, made available by the school, entices them to take advantage of it.

At one meeting, Leon, speaking on behalf of the mentors, admitted to the younger students, "We played around a lot as freshmen and sophomores. We want you to get off to a better start than we did."

The program focuses on relationship building, encouragement and academic help, notes Eureka social worker Naomi Warren who works with the mentors in creating the agendas for their semi-monthly meetings which she also oversees. A "buddy" system, where the mentors are linked up with two mentees with whom they check in regularly, provides an accountability component, she adds. Once a month, Warren meets with just the mentors to review the past week's meeting and plan for the next one. Feedback is encouraged via short questionnaires given to both the mentors and mentees.

See page 2: **Eureka Students**



In the two peer mentoring groups for VICC participants at Rockwood's Eureka High (one for females; one for males), older students meet with younger students during their mutual lunch hours to pass along advice and offer academic help. Here, from left, upperclassmen Martresa Landers and Aaniye Hammond chat with Anaia Elliott, a freshman.



Learning and growing together. Members of Women Empowering Women (WEW) chat during their semi-monthly lunchtime meeting.

Eureka Students *(from page 1)*

Another peer mentoring program for VICC participants, Women Empowering Women (WEW), began this school year and is structured much like the male group. It's a sisterhood of sorts, "where we all help each other," notes senior Martresa Landers who will enter Maryville University's Global Studies program in the fall. She says meeting topics have touched on setting goals and achieving them and how to recover from mistakes. Cortney Lassiter, a junior, says the program is designed with the younger girls in mind. "We are showing them the ropes so they feel comfortable at Eureka."

The male club has the same purpose. "We talk a lot about behavior and the social challenges of high school," notes Leon Hale. One student was having problems with a teacher and the mentors offered advice on how to handle the situation. Leon told the younger guys, "You may think your teachers are picking on you when really they just want to push you to do even better."

Eureka associate principal Jennifer Strauser points out that the work of FYM and WEW are "perfect examples of what we want from students when they recognize a need and want to be part of the solution." For several years now, she says, the focus of the school's social justice work has been "to empower students to take responsibility for change, encourage them to make small adjustments to positively affect the climate of our school community, and fill their toolboxes with powerful vocabulary, purposeful action and unconditional love."

For the FYM and WEW groups, the mentors' approach of being honest and down to earth is what makes the programs work, according to Brittany Hogan, Rockwood's Coordinator of Educational Equity and Diversity. "The mentors are not straight A students, but exhibit skills of leadership, are committed to serving their school community, and are willing to put in the time and effort to help others. They can admit their own shortcomings--past and present--and that makes them relatable to the underclassmen which helps in developing meaningful relationships."

Sometimes, the students use their time together watching inspirational videos by Eric Thomas or Lisa Nichols that are followed by discussions. It's also an opportunity to talk about issues associated with being a VICC participant. Frustrations are vented,

questions are asked, thoughts are exchanged. About the camaraderie that exists, junior Aaniye Hammond points out, "All of us have bonded. We have each other to turn to."

One-on-one tutoring is a big component of both programs. The mentors (each having a subject area in which they feel qualified to help) make their services available to the younger students. "Come to us if you need help with your classes," announced junior Andrew Rush, adding, "We're not going to judge you." Depending on the course, the requesting student is paired with a mentor and they make plans to meet after school for a study session.

Mentor Chris Stewart offered his services when a younger student asked for help in math. When the younger student mentioned he had basketball practice after school, Chris said, "Well then, ask your coach if you can meet with me." That dialogue led the mentors to address the official consequences of getting poor grades when playing a sport (basically restricted play) which served as a warning to the younger athletes.

Prior to finals, both the male and female mentors hold study sessions for their mentees. Last semester, they asked teachers for their test study guides and made up appropriate mock questions. They organized games that focused on answering the questions and prizes were awarded. Mentor Cortney Lassiter downplayed the time and effort the mentors must have put into this test preparation activity, saying, "It's worth it if they get the help they need!"

The mentors stress to the younger students that doing just enough to get by is not an acceptable standard. "We tell them, 'You need to shoot higher than just trying to get a passing grade,'" notes Cortney. Martresa tells about one girl who didn't say much in the meetings and seemed to come just for the pizza. "As long as she earned a D or better, she was ok with that," Martresa reports. "Then one day she shared with us that her grades were improving and she seemed really proud of that!"

Both groups of mentors point to other nuggets of progress made by individual students. Little by little, they believe their work is paying off. It's really a two-way street because the mentors say they have gained a lot as well. Junior Aaniye Hammond explains that when the mentors pass along their sage advice, "it's a reminder to heed it ourselves."

"Come to us if you need help with your classes. We are not going to judge you."

Andrew Rush
mentor
Fellowship of
Young Men (FYM)

Friend's Admiration Fuels Student's Desire to Soar

By Peggy Magee

At age 37, Isaac Butler is headed up the ladder of personal and professional success. Looking back on what molded him into the man he is, he credits most of all his mother, but also his participation in the VICC program that "provided me with my first realization that I was smart." That self image and the confidence it brought were powerful catalysts to opening his eyes early on to his potential.

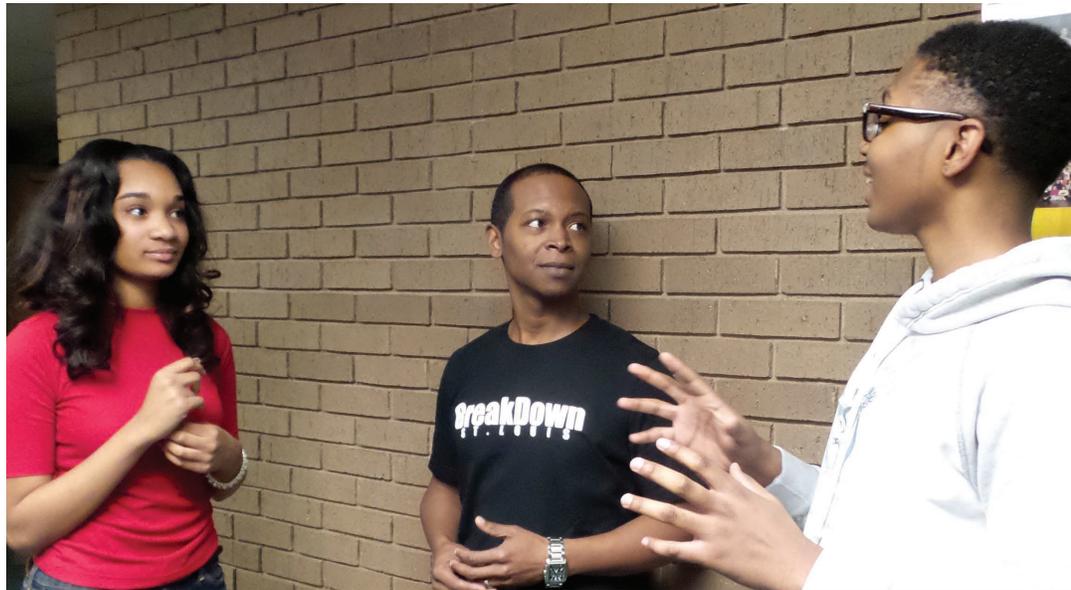
Butler made this important discovery when he was a fourth grader at Sappington Elementary School in the Lindbergh district. Being good at math, he won a classroom math competition, along with a resident student named Matt. The pair went on to represent their school in the county-wide math competition. Butler was beside himself that he was even asked to compete at that level. "Here I was, this little brown boy from the city," he recalls.

He did not perform as well as he would have liked, but Matt consoled him, pointing out that Butler was one of the smartest kids he knew. "Matt believed it and so I believed it," Butler explains, adding that because of Matt, he "reshifted" his thinking. His newly discovered sense of self worth motivated him "because I wanted to live up to Matt's image of me."

Butler was raised by a single mom and the family moved around a lot when he was young. He came to Sappington School, then returned to the city, and came back again. Ultimately, they moved to north county which made him ineligible for the VICC program, but he hasn't forgotten how pivotal the experience was in launching him.

Since those early years, this first generation college student has earned three degrees: Bachelor of Science in chemistry (Mizzou), Doctorate of Pharmacy (UMKC College of Pharmacy) and Master's in Business Administration (UMSL). Consistent throughout Butler's career, starting out as a pharmacist for Walgreens, has been his desire to learn, grow and positively affect others. At the St. Louis-based prescription benefit management company, Express Scripts International, he worked his way up from an intern to a corporate manager, leading teams in sales, account management, audit and product development.

He was a valued employee who engaged with the community by serving on the Crisis Nursery board, the University of Missouri Student Affairs board, the Barnes Jewish Hospital Foundation board and others. Representing his company, he



attended the nine-month Leadership St. Louis program and co-founded the Barnes-Jewish Hospital, Express Scripts and St. Louis College of Pharmacy (BES_t) Pharmacy Summer Institute for high school students to increase the number of minority healthcare providers.

Called by his deep faith and desire to make his community a better place to live, Butler left Express Scripts to start his own leadership consulting company. From working with youths at his church to discover their purpose, to helping young professionals maximize their contributions, to teaching pharmacy students about grit and resiliency, his mission is "to share with others what it takes to be exceptional in all areas of life," he notes. His clients include corporations, non-profits, universities and faith-based organizations. He also lends his expertise by continuing to serve on a multitude of non-profit boards including his place of worship, Ark of Safety Christian Church, where he also serves as the youth minister (ordained).

Recently, he was tapped to pave a new direction for Breakdown St. Louis, a peer to peer outreach program that encourages teens to make positive choices. Founded 10 years ago, Breakdown St. Louis is a talented team of 35 high school and college students who stage a one-hour performance, featuring drama, dance, video testimonies and other high energy elements, to deliver a powerful message of hope about sex, drugs and alcohol to teen audiences at St. Louis area schools.

Butler is leading the launch of a north county-St. Louis city expansion team of Breakdown St. Louis. As part of his duties, he provides two hours of spiritual and leadership development to the teen performers before their weekly rehearsals. When

Isaac Butler, center, provides spiritual and leadership development to youths involved with Breakdown St. Louis, one of the clients he works for in his leadership consulting business. He credits the VICC program with providing him a challenging, diverse environment where he discovered his potential at an early age. That realization fueled his efforts and, as a first generation college student, he went on to earn three degrees.

See page 4: *Friend's Admiration*

Message from the CEO



David S. Glaser

After working in the corporate arena for many years and then serving as the Chief Financial Officer for two area school districts, I truly believe that I have found my most rewarding calling the last six plus years serving as the Chief Executive Officer of the VICC program. This opportunity has broadened my perspective on life and allowed me to meet and work together with many talented and passionate folks in a much more diverse environment. Most importantly, the opportunity to participate in and support efforts to make a difference in the lives of students throughout the St. Louis metropolitan area is extremely rewarding and fulfilling. The headlines in the news each day underscore the prophetic words of Justice Thurgood Marshall, “Unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.” Unfortunately, it seems like almost every day there is a new headline or news report demonstrating the challenge of living together in peace and harmony. Fortunately, I believe that the VICC program has made many meaningful contributions in tearing down barriers, helping children learn together, and ultimately enabling all of us to work and live together in a mutually encouraging and beneficial manner.

I frequently mention in my regular message the importance of teachers and other staff members believing in and encouraging their students and setting high expectations for them. Similarly, the articles here emphasize how peer-to-peer relationships can also be valuable--both those amongst VICC participants and those between VICC participants and their resident counterparts. The opportunity for students to learn together will ultimately produce long-lasting benefits for all students in our participating districts, as well as for everyone in the entire St. Louis area.

David S. Glaser • dglaser@choicecorp.org • 314.721.8422, ext. 3013

A newsletter published by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation to spread the word about the positive things happening in the voluntary transfer program and to offer educators a glimpse at innovative programs helping students succeed at area schools.

David S. Glaser, C.E.O.
dglaser@choicecorp.org
314.721.8422, ext. 3013

Peggy Magee,
feature writer,
photographer, editor
pegmagee@sbcglobal.net
314-821-6802

Judy Dodd,
graphic designer
doddjudy@sbcglobal.net

Eureka Students *(from page 2)*

During the time allowed for affirmations in the mentors’ planning/recap meetings--when participants are singled out by each other for an insightful observation or suggestion--Naomi Warren got kudos from senior Brandin Veanson for her help in guiding the group. Warren reports, “Brandin added that he got involved thinking he would help the freshmen but it was really him who was impacted.” Warren feels the same way. “The energy of the mentors and their genuine desire to help the ninth graders are an inspiration to me. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with all of them.”

It’s a program with many beneficiaries!

Friend’s Admiration *(from page 3)*

the team members go into the schools, they put his coaching to work offstage, advising and mentoring their fellow students one-on-one.

A devoted husband and father, Butler has found true contentment by successfully blending faith, family, career and community. His hope is to continue impacting others by helping them experience joy and significance in their own lives. Young or old, no matter what race, religion or background, he finds pleasure inspiring people, pointing out that he is “comfortable in any setting,” thanks to his lifetime of diverse experiences, starting way back at Sappington Elementary School.

“That same place where I learned I was talented,” he notes, adding that being part of the VICC program was “an absolute blessing.”