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Striving for excellence

Program serves as inspiration to young African-American men in Athens area

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As a school counselor in North Carolina in the 1980s, Deryl Bailey noticed again and again that the only African-American males walking across the stage at awards ceremonies were those accepting scholarships for athletics.

Having grown up in a rough housing project in Durham, N.C., with his grandparents, he was acutely aware of the plight of young African-American males -- and he knew that with proper nurturing and strict discipline, that group of young people could rise to the highest ranks of academia en masse, serve their communities and exemplify positive behavior.

Now a professor of cross-cultural counseling at the University of Georgia, Bailey founded and oversees a project called Gentlemen on the Move. He recruits African-American males at Cedar Shoals High School and, more recently, Clarke Central High School, and woos them into his program through equal doses of love and discipline.

Each week, the young men gather at UGA to work on homework for two hours and then discuss issues that they face for another two hours. Attendance is



■ During Saturday morning academic tutoring 14-year-old Cedar Shoals High School freshman Stacy Smith Jr., right, gets some help from University of Georgia College of Education graduate student Tom Anderson.

Cameron Swartz/Staff ■

mandatory; commitment is demanded.

"My mom likes it," said 11th-grader Fabian Goings. "I'm on the borderline -- she wants me to do it."

Then Goings paused.

"I sure want to do it too."

"Do it" means to succeed. Goings was very nearly kicked out of Cedar Shoals at the end of last year after a stretch of skipping school, being involved in fights and not performing well in his classes.

"He had very low self-esteem," said his mother Joanne Goings. "He walked around with a nonchalant attitude. Like he was just so tough."

According to Joanne Goings, just before Fabian was going to be kicked out of school, Bailey showed up at assistant principal Michael Ashmore's office and pled with him to place Fabian in his care. Ashmore told Fabian he was granted a second chance because of Bailey's support.

While Bailey pushes his pupils to excel in school, he also tutors them in the ways of the domesticity.

"If they're doing well, I invite them to dinner at my house," said Bailey. "I want them to see men cook and clean."

Bailey's wife, Brad Bailey, is a teacher at Cedar Shoals High School. Her involvement in the program is crucial. She observes the students at school, makes sure they dress up once a week and praises them during the school day. She is the eyes and ears of the school halls.

Bailey is quick to say that education has never been geared toward African Americans' success and that some teachers have lower expectations for them, but the crux of his belief is that failure cannot be excused by outer circumstances.

In his written explanation of the program, Bailey wrote: "In an effort to explain the root of the problems facing young African American males, many have placed the burden of blame on the community, church, school and/or the home.

However, few have considered that in the final analysis, some of the blame rests with the young men themselves. I am of the opinion that the young men must shoulder the responsibility for their actions ... young African American males make the final decisions when it comes to choosing positive over negative and good over bad."

And while Joanne Goings attributes Fabian's trouble last year to the lack of a male role model, insufficient attention and peer pressure from the wrong group of kids, she knows that if he decides to turn his life around, he can do so.

Kortney Bolton, a senior at Cedar Shoals, thinks Gentlemen on the Move has helped him stay strong in the face of peer pressure and societal expectations.

"So often you're afraid of what other people might think of you," said Bolton. "But this group makes you

feel comfortable and not care so much."

Bolton and Goings said that the sphere of school is not unified, which further complicates the social sphere.

"It's not well integrated," said Bolton. "At lunch we all sit together with friends of the same color."

The young men cannot really point to the reasons for this, but they know it has been like that for a long time.

According to Bailey, the segregation also penetrates classrooms.

"I had a student that did very well and went into Algebra III, an upper level class," said Bailey. "He told me he always looked around and saw that he was the only African American male. Being cool, academic and a black male is hard. If you do good, you're considered to be a sissy and to be white."

But Bailey is doing everything he can to crack that image. Most notably, twice a year before final exams he holds a lock-in. The students meet together from Friday at 5 p.m. until Sunday afternoon. They study independently, in buddy groups and with tutors. They have breaks for basketball to relax and give the young men an opportunity to teach Bailey something. They are up at 6:30 each morning, ready to study.

As their grades rise, the young men also gain a sense of self.

"Mr. Bailey pushes us to do better. My parents tell me but I don't listen because they're just parents," said Bolton. "Then I come here and hear it from him and believe it."

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