

The Daily Review

Sunday | June 22, 2008

Hayward, California

An edition of the Oakland Tribune

Mentoring program helping at-risk youths travel along road to maturity, director says

■ Hayward-based Be A Mentor boasts 2,000 mentor matches — and hopes to expand

By **Cindy Luck**

STAFF WRITER

Her mother died in August. Her son is now 5 months old. She is only 16 and needs a job to help pay for her baby's expenses. She lives in a group home in Antioch.

Christina Kuykenball has seen more upheaval and turmoil in her short life than most of her peers and many adults. So when her social worker suggested that she work with someone from the Hayward-based Be A Mentor program to talk about the grief over her mother's death and her next steps in life, Kuykenball agreed.

Through her mentor, Kuykenball learns "interpersonal and adult respon-

sibility skills such as housing, child care, credit, transportation and job-hunting skills," said Dilip Chapagain, project manager for the foster care mentoring program with Be A Mentor.

"My mentor, Jennifer, spends time with me and helps me get the appropriate equipment to succeed in life, such as helping me figure out what to do next, and how to get a job," said Kuykenball, who also participates in home study at the group home.

BAM started out as a general youth service in the early 1990s. Shortly after it began, "we quickly saw that youth working one-on-one with adults proved to show an advancement of youth's growth and attitude, not only in a particular event, but in general," said Bob Goetsch, founder and executive director of BAM. In that time, BAM has had approximately 2,000 mentor matches.

Those the mentors work with tend

to be at-risk and foster care youths, or youths with an incarcerated family member. BAM staff make presentations in schools to tell students about the program, but it's up to students to contact BAM afterward if they want to receive help.

"At-risk" youths include those who may have poor academic skills, be in jeopardy of not graduating or not know where to go or what to do with their lives. The goal could be to just survive or stay out of gangs, Goetsch said.

After graduating from law school and finding a job, mentor Christopher Wood said, "I realized that I was incredibly lucky to have a job I love and to have gotten through law school. My parents were my biggest advocates. I couldn't imagine where I'd have gone or where I'd have been without them."

See **GIVING**, Page 4

Giving

From Page 3

That thought ignited the fire to become a BAM volunteer, and for the past five months Wood has worked with an at-risk, 15-year-old boy in foster care.

Wood wanted to give back, to make a difference, noting that this mentor work is "very fulfilling."

While he can't say for sure that the boy he works with is doing better since they began the relationship, he has been told by the foster home that his charge "seems to get in less trouble."

Among the activities Wood and the boy share are ice skating and trips to the movies. They also share a love of music, so they spend time at

Wood's home studio, hanging out, writing and singing songs and burning CDs.

"Mentors come from all walks of life," said Goetsch. "There's professional, blue collar, and graduate student mentors. They come from all aspects of life, and that very life experience is what these mentees are missing."

Recently, BAM received a federal grant and is looking to match youths with 1,200 volunteer mentors during the next three years. It also hopes to launch a mentoring program in the Tri-Valley area.

"We're looking for mentors who will accept youth exactly for who they are at the time, understanding that each youth is the sum total of their experience. They (the mentor) needs to role-model a different way of life, not impose a different way of life," Goetsch said.

The minimum volunteer mentor commitment is one year, Goetsch said. However the hope is that mentors will work with youths to create a lifelong, satisfying relationship.

Although there are hoops to jump through to become a mentor — background checks, fingerprinting, Department of Justice reports, tuberculosis tests — the work is rewarding, Goetsch said.

"We set a very high bar for the protection of the mentees," said Goetsch. "Children working with a mentor tend to not only do better in school, but better in life."

That's called making a difference.

Contacting us
Editor | Kim Santos
510.293.2468
Fax: 510.293.2490
ksantos@bayareanewsgroup.com

dailyreviewonline.com
LOCAL

A3

Sunday | June 22, 2008