

Bringing out their best:

Mentoring program helps teen girls share and shine



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Photo -VINO WONG / Staff

Guest speaker Jerrie Brooks talks about relationships between parents and their teens during Diamond in the Rough, a faith-based mentoring and leadership program, at Cannon United Methodist Church in Snellville.

On a recent Saturday morning, a group of teenage girls sat in a third-floor classroom at Cannon United Methodist Church in Snellville and did something you rarely see these days -- at least not in public.

They laughed and talked with their parents.

On any other weekend, the teens would have been paired with their mentors, professional women, college students and retirees who guide, encourage and support them.

On this day, they rapped with their parents, mostly mothers, about a wide range of issues, including curfews, communication and culture. While a facilitator took notes, they each took turns describing what they believe an ideal parent and teen would look like.

The teens are members of Diamond in the Rough, a nonprofit, faith-based mentoring and leadership program for girls ages 3 to 18. For four years now, they have been gathering weekly to talk, share and learn in a safe, structured environment.

All of it is founder Nicole Steele's way of transforming the world, one girl at a time.

Why this and why girls?

"Because it helped transform my own life," Steele said. "I'm a product of mentoring."



Photo -VINO WONG / Staff

Jasmine Harris, 14, (left) and Taylor Nelson, 13, listen during a recent mentoring program at Cannon United Methodist Church.

High expectations

Twenty years ago, Steele was a 16-year-old growing up in Ann Arbor, Mich. She was the only child of Jo Littleton, a divorced mother who supported the two of them as a city administrator.

Littleton introduced her daughter to professionals from her job and those whom she worked with in providing community service.

"My mom surrounded me with professionals," Steele said, "who set high expectations for me." Still, she said, she struggled with the same issues many teenage girls face: a negative body image, low self-esteem and boys. But at least she had people to talk to. It would be years, she said, before she fully appreciated her mother and the extended family she created for her.

In 1994, soon after she graduated from Alabama A&M University in Huntsville and moved to Georgia, Steele said she had an awakening. She held a bachelor's degree in business and a job as a computer analyst. Her heart, however, beckoned her in another direction.

Steele said she began to think about giving to others what her mother had given to her. She was convinced that "if we can teach girls, then they can raise the bar and the boys will follow."

Steele and a group of girlfriends went to the Eastside Carver Boys & Girls Club in Atlanta and told the director they wanted to mentor a group of girls.

It sounds good on paper, he told them that day in 1995, but the bottom line is, if they don't like you, you've got to go. Thus began what Steele and her friends called Sister to Sister, a mentoring program for 10 girls chosen by the club's director.



Nicole Steele, Founder

No one asked them to go. For the next six years, the group met every Tuesday to talk about topics such as relationships, sex and setting goals. They went on field trips to the civil rights museum in Birmingham, the Olympics in Atlanta and Howard University in Washington, D.C. They volunteered in the community. When the girls graduated from high school and went off to college, Steele said it was like what she'd imagine it's like being an empty-nester.

Steele, who married in 1998 and has a child of her own, decided she had to do more.

Mining diamonds

In 2001, she left corporate America to focus on her family life in Gwinnett County, where her husband, Rick, was manager of the shipping department at a local printing company.

Three years later, she launched Diamond in the Rough, taking the name from a creed they recited in Sister to Sister: "I'm a diamond in the rough, a rare and precious gem."

The goal, she said, was to reach and support 60 Gwinnett County girls. She ended up with 126, all referred to the program from schools, community agencies and by word of mouth.

Although the group offers a variety of programs, including a leadership academy, career and college preparation and family enrichment sessions such as the one held recently at Cannon, Steele said the group's primary focus is mentoring and providing family support. "This is my purpose," she said. "I'm doing what I was called to do, hopefully making a difference."

Staying focused

Lateria McDew, 25, said the organization made a "big difference" in her life.

She was a shy 14-year-old who lacked self-confidence when Steele introduced Sister to Sister to the Carver Boys & Girls Club. Her world was limited to the streets around the Atlanta community where she lived.

Sister to Sister knocked down the walls, she said, taking her on her first airplane flight to the nation's capital, where she visited the White House, Howard University and Arlington National Cemetery.

"I'll always remember that trip," she said recently, "and how they motivated me to stay focused and to build a better relationship with my parents and others."

McDew, who went on to graduate from Frederick Douglass High School in Atlanta and get a mathematics degree from Georgia Southern University, said the group helped build her confidence and make her a better communicator.

The girls, she said, "made you feel like sisters at heart."

Diamond in the Rough members Kourtney Chester and Jeniece Edwards said that sentiment still holds true.



Edwards, a 15-year-old Grayson sophomore, joined in 2003 after getting a flier at school.

At the time, she said, she didn't have many friends and, like McDew, found it difficult to communicate with family members.

The Saturday gatherings, she said, give her the confidence she needs to get through the week.

"Instead of Monday being the beginning of the week," she said, "this starts my week."

Edwards said mentors provide a needed respite from her home life and allow her and the other teens volunteer opportunities and a chance to talk frankly about sticky issues such as sex and drugs. Before she joined, she said it would have never occurred to her to volunteer.

"I'm no longer skipping through life," she said. "It's like I'm on the track team. I'm sprinting."