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## **Bolder Options offers activity-based mentorship to kids**

**Robyn Dochterman**, Star Tribune

The air, heavy with the smell of lilacs and rain, rushes cool against Samuel Morris' face as he coasts down a steep hill. Twice Morris' size, Rick Maas speeds ahead, pony tail flying out the back of his bike helmet.

Past million-dollar houses and a flattened turtle they fly. The joy of the downhill stretch is a welcome antidote to the thigh-burning, gear-grinding work of pumping uphill, and a fitting reward for being out biking this Sunday morning.

While most kids are home sleeping, watching cartoons or sitting in church daydreaming of blueberry pancakes, Morris and Maas are riding around Lake Minnetonka.

At first glance, they seem very different. But if the sight of the 11-year-old black youth riding alongside the 49-year-old white man raises eyebrows, neither Morris nor Maas notices. Besides, they have more in common than meets the eye.

They both live in north Minneapolis, familiar with the same streets and shops. Both have a dry sense of humor, like to read and talk sports. Both are wearing black T-shirts today. They've met to ride a couple of times, but today's trek -- 26 miles -- is their first long one together. It is Samuel's longest ride ever, but he says he isn't nervous.

A program called Bolder Options introduced them. Begun five years ago as a project of the Minneapolis Jaycees, Bolder Options pairs at-risk kids with adult mentors to run or bike twice a week for 12 weeks. The goal: to promote positive youth behavior. The youth and mentor train together for community races or such tours as the Lake Minnetonka ride.

Brent Nolan, Bolder Options' biking program manager, says many adults find acting as a mentor easier with a familiar athletic activity they can share.

"Mentors want to contribute, but may be concerned about relating to the youth," he says. "Having structured activities and goals allows them to focus both their energy and that of the youth."

Kids in the program are identified by schools, social service agencies or police as being on the cusp of trouble. Some are truant or have committed a minor first offense, such as shoplifting. Others could just benefit from an additional caring adult in their lives.

Bolder Options is one of about 135 mentor programs in the Twin Cities area and 400 such programs in Minnesota. Kari Davis, executive co-director of The Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota, says young people who have mentors have a better chance of succeeding and are likelier to make positive choices.

"Mentoring is about opening up resources for kids," she said. "They get information on how to get a job, about life skills, about being able to dream. It exposes kids to different experiences that they wouldn't have on their own, and they see they can turn their life around."

Bolder Options' own research underscores the benefits. A study of 20 youth participants last fall found that the program's activities helped kids manage stress and anger better and strengthen relationships with their friends, family and community.

### Setbacks expected

Still, mentoring is not all a ride in the park, even for veterans like Maas, who has shepherded two other participants through the program. He was originally matched with another youth this spring, but things didn't work out.

And while Maas was on his way to pick up Samuel to take him to the tour this morning, another mentor, Elizabeth O'Brien, was knocking at the door of her 15-year-old mentee. But she got no answer and had to ride the tour alone.

O'Brien hopes this is a temporary setback. "It's hard in ways I didn't really expect," O'Brien says. "It's really hard to meet twice a week. I've been feeling guilty, like there's something I haven't been doing, but I can't make her do something she doesn't want to."

Even when youths are engaged in the program, external factors may limit participation, including family situations and personal crises.

Seventh-grader Sara Zavoral recently left the program, although she had high praise for it. "I think it [Bolder Options] is a good idea for kids to stay out of trouble," she said. "You learn a lot about things. You have firsthand experiences ... sort of like a family."

But Sara is enthusiastic about swimming and busy training to become a lifeguard. She wants to do lawn work to get some money this summer, too. And to go in-line skating. At 13, life is busy.

Kids who can't keep commitments might thwart some adults, but it's not an uncommon situation in mentoring relationships. Program staff members at Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Greater Minneapolis, one of the largest mentoring programs in the country with 1,300 matches, advises its mentors that the relationship might be one-sided for several months.

At Bolder Options, it is Nolan's job to regroup.

"It's not really frustrating," he says. "But I know what I'll be doing tomorrow. Instead of recruiting new mentors, I'll be reestablishing relationships. But relationships are what this program is all about."

Near the end of the Minnetonka route, O'Brien finds new life in her legs as she rides over short, rolling hills. She catches Maas and Samuel.

All three are splattered with mud. Samuel has a few scrapes from when his bike wheel slipped off the pavement and into a ditch. Finally finished with the course, he finds a hose and gives his bike a quick shower while he and Maas discuss how they'll celebrate.

Soft-spoken and reserved, Samuel is clearly pleased. He peels off his black Bolder Options T-shirt and shows it to the small knot of people gathered around. A thick, brown stripe of mud runs smack down the middle of it.

"This," he says, "I am going to take home and hang on my wall."

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