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Mentor project leaps ahead

Volunteers from its first St. Paul office will pair up with at-risk youths.

BY TIFFANY CLEMENTS
Pioneer Press

Sipping hot chocolate from beneath mounds of whipped topping on a recent evening, Mackenzie Lobby, 24, and Courtney Coleman, 14, looked more like old friends chatting about the week's events than athletes who had just completed a nearly three-mile practice run around Minneapolis' Lake Harriet.

The pair topped off their weekly training session with conversation, discussing everything from cell phones to school to goals for their upcoming 5K race to Coleman's collegiate and career ambitions.

"I want to be a lawyer," she said, "but not a family lawyer. The guilt would just kill me."

The two met in June through Bolder Options, an 11-year-old Minneapolis-based mentorship program that recently announced plans to expand to St. Paul.

Coleman, a freshman at South High School, and Lobby are one of about 120 mentor/"mentee" pairs active in the organization that connects at-risk youth with adults through physical activity. Pairs meet once a week, often to run or ride bikes, and work together to reach physical, academic and personal goals.

Given the program's success, a number of St. Paul leaders have requested the organization's presence, said Ryan Foss, Bolder Options' director of volunteer and community relations.

"St. Paul has been asking us to expand for many years," he said. "They see a need for us to fill a hole."

It's hoped the program's expansion serves as a sort of preventive medicine.

"Eighty percent of our kids are referred from the juvenile justice system," Foss said. Most of the youths have not committed crimes, but many may be heading down dangerous paths, he said.

They often are referred to Bolder Options because of such things as petty crimes, academic struggles or truancy problems. School attendance problems, for example, spurred Coleman's involvement in the program.

"A lot of our kids are great kids," Foss said. "They just messed up once."

Foss said the organization will focus its efforts on St. Paul's East Side and hopes to open its new office in January. Bolder Options, a nonprofit organization funded through individual donations, private foundations and government grants, will hire two new staff members to manage St. Paul operations.

Since its inception in 1995, the program has reached more than 750 youths. Foss said 80 percent of those who complete the yearlong Bolder Options program stay out of trouble in the long term.

Coleman and Lobby said they are more interested in the simple benefits of friendship and bonding than the more abstract societal good.

Lobby, an avid runner and freelance writer who works part time at Marathon Sports, said she had repeatedly heard about the program while participating in Twin Cities races. However, the 2006 graduate of the College of St. Benedict in central Minnesota was unable to sign up as a mentor until she moved to Minneapolis after graduation.

"I had to wait until I knew I'd be in the area to make the one-year commitment," she said.

Lobby didn't know what to expect when she signed up for the program but has been happy with her match.

"The friendship we've formed has been great," she said.

Coleman said she will take away a new interest and new connections from the program.

"I found a new hobby, and I've had the chance to meet other young people," she said.

In addition, Coleman can take away a sense of accomplishment.

At last month's Bolder Dash, the program's annual bike and foot race, Lobby and Coleman exceeded their team goal. They had hoped to top their previous race time by two minutes and ended up beating it by four.

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To learn more

For more information or to become a mentor, visit www.bolderoptions.org or call 612-379-2653. Bolder Options is headquartered at 2100 Stevens Ave., Minneapolis.

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