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Bolder Options builds bodies and lives

With mentors and physical challenges, South Minneapolis program reaches

By Casey McDowell

"What do you do with a kid that's fat, but really intelligent, or a kid who is really with school?" Becky Pilarzyk asked. She is the program director of Bolder Options, that has an answer to that question.

Low self-esteem, Pilarzyk explained, is just one of many reasons that students skip a constant problem in the Minneapolis school district, and Bolder Options works with first-time offenders. It matches each youth admitted to the program with a mentor full year of one-on-one time together.

According to the program description, "Bolder Options combines mentoring, goal education, tutoring, athletic activities, community support and parental involvement academic success of youth who are at risk of academic failure, dropping out of school delinquent behavior."

This combination makes the program unique. Students and their mentors make goals and work on achieving them throughout the year. They participate in at least biking events, for which they train weekly.

Some 106 youth were paired with mentors in 2005, and the goal for 2007 is to serve are boys and girls ages 10-14 who are considered "at-risk." Athletic experience is reliability and a willingness to try are. Most kids live in Hennepin County, and must be either a first-time offender, truant, struggling in school or would simply benefit from model."

Many youth are recommended for the program because they are truant. Willie Br Hennepin County Attorney's Office Truancy Unit, said that sometimes students just help them get back on track. Nearly 1,600 truancy referrals are received by the county year, and the reasons are as varied as the students' backgrounds.

As Pilarzyk mentioned, self-esteem can be an issue. Darrell Thompson, Bolder Options director, explained that other kids stay home because their parents need them to help one makes go to school. Peer-pressure, bullying, and embarrassment can also affect

Thompson has been involved with the program since it began as a part of the Mir Charitable Foundation. He was named executive director in 1998, when Bolder Options independent organization. "I used to know the name and story of every kid here," "I spend more time making phone calls and going to meetings."

It's part of the job, he explained. He helps in other ways now, finding the funds to pay for the house on Stevens Avenue in South Minneapolis where the program is held activity fees and equipment for the kids. Thompson's bright, airy office is decorated

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kids and colorful crayon drawings.

Once a youth is admitted to the program, he or she is matched a mentor. For the they spend two to four hours a week running, biking, or working on academics. The work toward over the next year. They participate in races or rides and community s allows them to meet new people in the community and learn more about healthy lif

During the last eight months, mentors and youth continue to meet at least two to although many pairs meet more often. They continue to train, study, and volunteer speakers in the "Attic," a space in the Bolder Options house for student activities. S eating and lifestyles, communication, education, violence prevention, anger manag relationships and good decision making. These are all geared toward the program c youth to succeed in ALL of life's races."

Mentors are typically recruited at races, health clubs, and biking or running store training to prepare them for the 150-hour commitment to their mentees. "They get time commitment," Pilarzyk said, "but they all say that when it's over, they got so spending time with those kids than any kid got out of them."

Between program managers and mentors, the families also become involved. Qui appeared on NBC's "The Today Show" with Al Roker, has become more active since and Quincy and his mom have lost weight together. His self-esteem has skyrockete explained, and he has caught up in school. His reading level is now the same as his goals set with his mentor.

When Roker visited Bolder Options with his cross-country "Lend a Hand" program and bikes for the kids. He also brought much needed attention to the program, whe volunteers are needed more than equipment.

The \$550,000 program budget is largely supported by individuals. Companies an also contribute to the cause, and although one grant was lost this past year, severa have helped cover the difference. These donations were made to Bolder Option's C which is running from 2004 to 2006.

With the money raised by this campaign, the program's goal is to serve as many it is successful, services will be expanded to support children of prisoners in Henne counties and provide on-site counseling for families. Also, more staff will be hired s management will be offered to 200 youth each year.

To contribute time or money to Bolder Options, call (612) 379-BOLD.

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