

Training for life

By Anna Pratt

Stevens Square's Bolder Options matches mentors with youth for a year of training

Sixteen-year-old Collin Osborne's fastest running time is 33 minutes in a 5-kilometer (5K) race. Osborne has run three 5K races around the Twin Cities over the past year.



Photo by Allen Smith

Collin Osborne (left) and Graham Hartley run along Victory Memorial Parkway.

The teen is training with his mentor, Graham Hartley, as part of Bolder Options, a Stevens Square youth intervention program. Usually, they make their strides on a stretch of Memorial Parkway, close to Osborne's house in North Minneapolis.

Bolder Options pairs volunteer mentors and at-risk 10- to 15-year-olds from across Hennepin County for a year to work toward athletic and personal goals. Within the first several months, a mentor and child spend up to 80 hours together, doubling the mentoring requirement of other similar programs. Children also attend biweekly classes at Bolder Options on topics ranging from nutrition to sexuality.

Despite the physical emphasis, the point isn't to train someone to become a star athlete, said Bolder Options Executive Director Darrell Thompson, a former Minnesota Gopher and NFL football player. Rather, the youth learn to set manageable goals and obtain them while maintaining fitness.

"We take it for granted that it's a step-by-step process to finish and accomplish things. Kids get to do the things they want to be able to do," he said.

Thompson pointed out that one mentee who was overweight lost 25 pounds last year. The same child climbed out of special education and improved by two grade levels in reading.

Hartley, a member of the Bolder Options board of directors, said the program is mutually beneficial. He has lost 10 pounds just by running alongside Osborne. Hartley got involved in the program through his work on the School Attendance Review Board.

Hartley is the program director at the Longfellow-based Migizi Communications, an agency devoted to broadening opportunities for the Native American community. He is married and has two small children.

One reason he decided to mentor was to jumpstart his running habit. But that's

secondary to his and Osborne's connection: "Our relationship is positive and nonjudgmental," Hartley said. "When we talk more personally, he can choose to share or not. We've established confidence in the privacy of the relationship and can talk openly."

Osborne and Hartley are still talking every couple weeks, even though they're now beyond the program. Osborne will officially graduate from Bolder Options on June 7.

A better running time

Osborne, who is the oldest of five children, often wears baggy pants, an oversized shirt and a hat tilted to the side. He likes to hang out with friends and go to nightclubs on Friday nights. He was recommended for the program because of his problems with truancy.

Over the past year, Osborne has aspired to stay in school, read a novel, quit smoking, help with chores at home and improve his running time, among other goals.

Although school remains tough, Osborne is proud of his achievements, which he and Hartley tried to keep simple. Osborne's scores improved in each race, except for one in which he injured his ankle. Osborne has also quit smoking and read a book Hartley bought for him called "Coach." At home, he does his best to consistently wash the dishes and take out the trash.

His favorite event was the Reindeer Run around Lake Harriet, which features runners dressed up in holiday costumes. Osborne and Hartley filled water buckets for sprinters.

After runs, the pair often went out to eat together and sometimes they would go bowling or to sporting events. They talked candidly about school, jobs, family, fashion, music and girls.

Osborne said Hartley has helped him find ways to cope with stress.

"You have to try to keep friends," he said. "You have to take a second for yourself and calm down."

Being Bold

Bolder Options is a national initiative that began in Boulder, Colo., in 1993 and came to Minneapolis in 1995. After initially focusing on running, the organization later added a biking component to the mentorship.

Children receive a pair of tennis shoes when they enter the program and a free bike when they leave. A mentor and child can also use area "Y" facilities for free.

Children arrive at Bolder Options for a variety of reasons. School counselors, social workers, juvenile justice, diversion programs or adult corrections may refer them. The children aren't violent but are considered at-risk due to truancy or other offenses. To participate in the program, mentors must be at least 21, have a phone, reliable transportation, a spotless driving record and updated driver's insurance.

At any time, there are 120 children in the Minneapolis program and up to 80 on a waiting list. Of 350 children served in the past seven years, 80 percent are no longer truant or haven't got in trouble with the law again. On the whole, their school grades have also improved.

Quiana Perkins, a recent graduate who works at the Powderhorn YWCA, just started mentoring Octavia Lindsay, a freshman at Southwest High School, a month ago. They're in the biking program. Recently, the twosome biked six miles around Lake of the Isles.

Bolder Options inspired Perkins because it doesn't try to "save" children or solve all of their problems, she said. Instead, it focuses on changing a child's lifestyle. "The mentality is more about helping each other grow. It's a reciprocal relationship. That was important," she said, sitting next to Osborne, Lindsay and Hartley at a roundtable at the Bolder Options office.

When she asked the veteran mentor-child pair for advice for the next year, Osborne, who admitted that he "messes up" once in awhile, said, "Do the best you can and stay positive," adding, "Right now, life is good."

For more information about Bolder Options, check out www.bolderoptions.org or call 379-2653.

Anna Pratt can be reached at apratt@mnpubs.com and 436-4391.

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