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Mentors work to give Burnsville kids a boost confidence

Growing program includes boys at 1 school, girls at 8

By Maricella Miranda
mmiranda@pioneerpress.com

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Bill Kraemer knows what it's like to grow up against the odds.

By age 15, he was working two jobs to pay the electricity for himself and his five siblings and was going to school during the day.

Now 43, he wants to make someone else's life a little easier.

To do that, Kraemer mentors Guled Osman, an eighth-grader from Nicollet Junior High in Burnsville, through Hope for Tomorrow. The program has been matching professional women with girls for 11 years, and now it matches professional men with boys, too.

"I do think I can relate to a lot of these kids," said Kraemer, of Apple Valley.

The program's first male group launched this school year at Nicollet Junior High, where the girls' program has existed for nearly four years. More than a dozen junior high boys and their mentors took a field trip Thursday to Normandale Community College, where they talked with the boys about college options, applying for school and campus life.

Teachers, principals and counselors pick students for the yearlong program who could benefit from a "boost of confidence," said Darlene Miller, a facilitator of Hope for Tomorrow.

"It's not treated as a negative," she said.

Students even plead for the chance to be a part of it.

During the monthly meetings, the mentors give their students job-interviewing tips and pointers on public speaking. They also take tours of corporations, like Best Buy.

"This program has helped me out a lot," said Josh Horton, 15, a ninth-grader. "It helped me to get a better grasp on college. I had a lot of worries about how much it would cost."

Josh's mentor is Daron Van Helden, president of the Burnsville Chamber of Commerce. Along with Josh's plans for college, they also talk about their hobbies.

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But mock interviews were what really helped them connect.

students. More information is available at hopefortomorrowmentoring.org.

"We learned a lot about each other, our mentors, and more about ourselves," Josh said.

On Thursday's trip to Normandale, it was obvious the wall between mentors and mentees wasn't quite broken down, yet. The boys went to the back of the bus, while their mentors snatched seats in the front. Just the opposite happened during a tour of the college. Mentors walked behind the boys, while the students hurried in front.

Lunch was a different story.

The two worlds collided among hamburgers and potato chips.

"You can tell these kids really want to be here," Kraemer said.

The program began in a Bloomington school with the intention of expanding to other schools. It now includes two schools in Bloomington and Burnsville and one in Apple Valley, Eden Prairie, Eagan and White Bear Lake. But only Nicollet has a group for boys.

The program could spread to Illinois for the 2010-11 school year.

"That's the goal," Miller said. "I really think it will happen."

Maricella Miranda can be reached at 651-228-5421.

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