

TAMPA Tribune
October 27, 2005

At close of foster care, program aims to open doors

By SHERRI ACKERMAN, Tampa Bay Tribune (sackerman@tampatrib.com)

TAMPA -- Raymond Sweet was adopted when he was 3 years old.

The Verizon analyst shows his gratitude by helping teens who didn't get the same chances in life he did.

Sweet, a member of 100 Black Men of Tampa Bay, sought out Hillsborough Kids Inc. and its foster teen program, Connected by 25.

The program, financed in part by Eckerd Family Foundation of Clearwater, helps young people leaving the child welfare system learn to be self-sufficient.

About 800 foster children "age-out" of state care each year in Florida. Some are still in high school when they turn 18 and must move from their foster homes or facilities.

While they remain in school, the state pays a monthly scholarship, but the students aren't guaranteed any money. More often than not, the teens aren't ready to be on their own, said Diane Zambito, who oversees the program locally.

Zambito will be among 150 community and business leaders in the Tampa Bay area attending a brunch today to recruit people as "door openers," mentors and/or partners providing foster children with opportunities for jobs, internships, housing and transportation.

Mostly, mentors offer hope.

Sweet and his group help teach about 11 teenage boys each week on investing and saving their money. They get access to online financial profiles through Web sites such as Hoovers.com, look at portfolios and prospectives, and study penny stocks.

Through an agreement with Washington Mutual bank, the teens receive \$10 a week in the 12-week program and can either save it or invest it, Sweet said. For many, it's the first time they've ever dealt with their own money.

It's a good feeling to guide the young men, Sweet said.

"I'm always excited to give back," he said, especially when it comes to foster children and those awaiting adoption.

100 Black Men of Tampa Bay is a 4-year-old chapter of the national Black Men of America, founded in 1963 to provide minority youths with mentors and leadership skills.

"The goal is to expose these children to financial matters and to men they might otherwise not have contact with," said chapter President Henry Bell Jr., a diversity manager for TECO.

"They need to know there are people out there who exist who have compassion," Bell said. "Each of us feels compelled that these children have resources to cope."

Connected by 25 in Tampa is one of three national pilot projects sponsored by Eckerd Family Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education and Casey Family Programs.

The breakfast by invitation begins at 10 a.m. in Regency Ballroom No. 2 at the Hyatt Regency, 211 N. Tampa St.

For information about becoming a door opener or to make a donation, call (813) 314-2070.

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