

BRIDGES: One Big Facet of Uptown's Resurgence

Landmark incubates tomorrow's leaders as neighborhood picks up

ANDY MEEK | *The Daily News*

Marcus Jackson, a 20-year-old business major at the University of Memphis, is still amazed at his personal transformation over the last few years.

He went from being a typical, introverted high school student to winning a string of accolades. He was chosen captain of his school's track team, senior class secretary and homecoming king. Jackson's peers at Kirby High School voted him "Mr. Senior."

Jackson graduated from BRIDGES' Bridge Builders program, which helps people like him build character and leadership skills.

"I had never heard about the program before, just that it was something that would be good to put on a college transcript," he said. "But it changed my life."

Funding infusion

This fall, BRIDGES is adding a new dimension to its work that will allow it to change even more lives. Thanks to a donation from the California-based Coalition of Essential Schools - an award that was made possible by funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation - BRIDGES is working with the Memphis City Schools system to develop an alternative high school that will enable more interaction between students and teachers and have smaller class sizes.

Lisa Moore Willis, vice president of programs for BRIDGES, said the school is part of a broad movement to shake up the traditional educational model and find new ways to reach children. It will be housed inside the BRIDGES building at 477 N. Fifth St., where an incoming ninth-grade class of 50 students will start in August.

A class with 50 students will be added each year until the school has 200 students in grades nine through 12.

"There are five high schools here converting to smaller facilities, so we're really part of an exciting movement in the school district," she said. "This really is an alternative to the traditional setting, where a young person who was just feeling kind of stifled can really flourish."

Teaching servant leadership

BRIDGES is as good a place as any to do it. The nonprofit organization is known for its slate of youth-oriented learning programs that are usually built around adventure and teamwork.

The group is just as widely known for its building, with its exposed steel trusses and massive windows. It was designed by Coleman Coker, principal of buildingstudio in Memphis.



-- Photograph courtesy of BRIDGES

EYES ON THE FUTURE: *Activities like this one are a regular part of BRIDGES' Bridge Builders program, in which the nonprofit organization develops young leaders while the neighborhood around it improves.*

On any given day, school children can be found at the center dangling 35 feet in their air on the AutoZone Challenge Course or performing other activities that foster teamwork. There are opportunities for similar activities elsewhere at BRIDGES, including a 30-foot climbing wall, but the group is more than a glorified recreation center.

Investing in people potential

BRIDGES officials say their work is leaving an imprint on Memphis in the form of future civic and business professionals. Work BRIDGE, another of BRIDGES' slate of programs, provides career training, placement and coaching. Specific job skills for certain industries and a GED program also are offered through it.

Current participants like 20-year-old Dewayne Cathren say they believe the opportunities it provides are indispensable.

"I came here once and left, and I just had to come back," he said. "I'm just going to be sticking to getting my GED and staying involved here as long as I can."

A four-year study of Bridge Builders participants by the Memphis Alliance for Public Health Research found the program is effectively fostering leadership development. Most participants who responded said they believed the program has encouraged them to be more active in their communities.

But a group with such an ambitious goal can't achieve it alone. BRIDGES depends on support and funding from individuals,



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*- Jim Boyd
BRIDGES president*

foundations and local businesses.

"So I guess what I'm really excited about would be not just the school, but really these collaborative relationships that we're building," said BRIDGES president Jim Boyd. "It really is this kind of slow, behind-the-scenes work that, over time, is going to contribute to the improved quality of life for our community and especially for our kids."

New year, new activity

2006 will be a milestone in BRIDGES' history in several ways. The new school will open this fall, and the group is also in the throes of a major fund-raising campaign. By January 2007, BRIDGES leaders hope to have raised \$5 million

and broadened the group's supporter base. BRIDGES' board of trustees and staff also want to retire all capital debt, establish a reserve fund for operations and grow its endowment exponentially.

"You know, we could just save time and energy and play in our own sandbox, as it were, but that's not what this community needs," Boyd said. "It takes a collaborative process to improve the milieu in which kids are being educated, and it requires a lot of patience, willingness and a principled commitment to be part of that process."

In the meantime, Jackson, who is studying business, says BRIDGES inspired him to become a teacher.

Willis said that's the kind of result BRIDGES is aiming for - inspiring one child, who will have a positive impact on an exponential number of people.

"There are so many adolescents here who really care about helping people, and they just want an opportunity to build the skills to do it," she said. "And once they get a nibble of it, they soar."

*Andy Meek
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