

# A GROWING BROTHERHOOD

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By Dan Campana Staff writer



If a moment could capture the essence of what the Boys II Men fraternity set out to do five years ago, it might have come two weeks ago.

Wearing suits and smiles, the sharply dressed young men stood by politely as city officials heaped praise and recognition upon the fraternity for its community impact. The words described the mission, but the scene appeared to show the in-progress results of work to keep young black and Latino men from going adrift.

Perhaps a better portrayal of the focus and discipline explicitly associated with Boys II Men -- B2M for short -- came a week later. During the first inconveniencing snowfall of winter, 11 members ignored the elements after a long day of school and extracurricular activities to talk about their brotherhood.

"We're always gonna be there for you," 16-year-old Jamario Taylor, an East Aurora High School junior, said of the bond between members.

For five years, the brotherhood has instilled and inspired a need for self-improvement -- how to become a man reigns as an undeniable theme -- through introspection, conversation and community outreach. The result: Members said through these efforts they've developed a passion to succeed.

"It's like a life preparation group," Tracy Cooper, another 16-year-old West High junior, described.

A 2002 surge in gang violence, as well as deaths attributed to it, prompted the Boys II Men's creation by Clayton Muhammad. With a focus on young black and Latino men, it started with 12 members, a number chosen to equal Aurora's gang leaders at the time.

Recently celebrating its fifth year, about 150 members comprise the four pieces of the Boys II Men puzzle: The fraternity; junior B2M, a group of grade schoolers mentored by the fraternity; B2M Scholars, fraternity alums and college students; and Diamonds, B2M's year-old sister organization.

"We have so many programs for kids that do wrong," Muhammad explained of B2M's formation. "I took the gang mindset. They get more kids than any club in the city. That first summer, we continued to grow."

Five years later, the group no longer follows the "anti-gang" model. It even reinvented itself over the summer with something Muhammad called "Making the Frat," a take off on reality shows that required all members to reapply in hopes of becoming one of 60 fraternity brothers.

"We're trying to build an exclusive organization," Muhammad said of the process. "There was not one guy who didn't know why they didn't make it."

As a testament to B2M's impact, no one pouted or got angry about not making the cut. Instead, they've worked hard at trying to one day regain membership, 32-year-old Muhammad said.

Listening to the 11 who gathered on that snowy night, it becomes obvious they don't just want to be in B2M, they want to succeed.

Although they carry different backgrounds, each talked about goals -- going to college, giving back to their community or simply striving to have a future -- in a way that shows a maturing mindset. East Aurora High School junior James Jones called it "crossover, the shift from boyhood and manhood."

Members are encouraged to bring friends to meetings, a common way for pledges to be recruited, and most do as a way to answer the persistent questions from classmates and others.

### **'A gem here'**

Collectively and individually, fraternity members endure jokes referencing 1990s R&B group Boyz II Men, deal with the doubters and handle the pressure associated with the high-profile organization. At the same time, members report how they've changed at home, in the classroom and with their life perspectives.

And, the community has taken notice of how Boys II Men's approach differs from other programs with the same goal of keeping youth from turning to the streets and gangs.

"How many of these young men could have gone astray? How many didn't have hope beyond high school?" Aurora Police Chief William Powell said. "(B2M) is encouraging to me because I see so much of the despair, the mayhem. This is just one of the answers in this town.

"We've got a gem here," he added.

Oswego High School senior Josh Pugh admits he wasn't always headed in the right direction before joining Boys II Men. The lessons he's picked up that helped him avoid gangs have become part of how he's tried to steer a relative clear of trouble.

"He's on his way to (juvenile detention). I was on that path," Pugh, 17, said. "I see it as my job to help (my family)."

Added Todd Armstrong, a DeKalb High School junior, "Instead of running the streets, I'm trying to fix the streets."

### **Tough topics**

During meetings held on the first and third Sundays of the month, the discussion frequently hits on breaking the stereotypes attached to members' races or ethnic groups. One meeting flyer states plainly, "Black & Latino Males, Statistic or Success? It's Up To You."

Of equal importance is how each member handles himself in relationships with parents, teachers and, a popular topic, young women.

A February 2006 meeting, held a week before Valentine's Day, focused on the basics of a "proper" male-female relationship and how women should be treated. The "Distinguished Gentleman" discussion was so popular that it was continued to the following meeting two weeks later.

Because teen guys are, after all, teen guys, such conversations might not be easy to have at home. Among the brotherhood, West Aurora senior Diego Perez said everyone is "so comfortable" talking about the tough topics.

Then there's the simple stuff, taking out the garbage or cleaning up around the house. It's hard to deny that most teens give a little push back when asked to do chores. Taylor laughed when talking about the old days of lying around the house when things needed to get done.

Now, he thinks, "Let me do this before my mom asks," he said.

### **'The Muhammad Effect'**

Boys II Men President and West High senior Joshua Jones suggests that attitude is part of the "positive pressure" that comes with being a member. Whether at home, at school or anywhere, members always know they are an extension of the fraternity no matter the time or place.

"You really have to watch what you do in public. If they find out your in Boys II Men, it looks bad for the group," Cooper, a two-year member, explained.

In the classroom, East High sophomore Kyndal Meeks knows that once his teachers see him in a B2M T-shirt, expectations immediately increase. With a little hesitation, Meeks mentioned a particular sleepy moment where the idea of resting on his desk seemed like a good idea and how he fought the urge for a quick snooze.

"What if Clayton just walked through that door?" 15-year-old Meeks remembered thinking, leaving Muhammad's likely reaction to the imagination.

B2M's positive momentum comes directly from Muhammad, according to Powell, a 31-year Aurora police veteran.

"I have never seen that guy discouraged," Powell said. "Some thing is instilled in him to give back."

The "Muhammad effect" continues for B2M alums. Mario Elias joined the fraternity as a 16-year-old at West High who struggled with self confidence. He cited Muhammad's guidance and approach to positive reinforcement for his personal growth.

"That really just pushed me," said Elias, an audio design student at Columbia College.

Muhammad describes that push as a healthy competition, where members thrive off each others accomplishments and try to do even more. Results from the approach - including the two dozen or so high school graduates - have led to some of the private funding B2M receives. Muhammad listed the county's riverboat grant fund and Weed & Seed as providing financial support, but also pointed out "non-traditional sources" -- individuals and families -- who donate because they like what they see.

Muhammad predicts the B2M model will grow and hopes a B2M academy can become reality. In the meantime, Westmont High School has started a chapter, and Muhammad has talked to other suburban schools looking for a new program.

Since cloning himself to cover all the bases isn't likely, Muhammad is confident that the "grow our own" philosophy means future leaders are already in the fold.

For Elias, his prediction for the next five years is simple.

"I hope they'll be talking about the same things they are now," he said.

