

HOW BOYS LEARN TO BECOME MEN

Clayton Muhammad is not trying to help boys who are in desperate situations, and he's not trying to solve the worst cases.

The Director of Boys II Men, a multiracial fraternity for young men in middle school and high school, Muhammad sees his target group as those boys who need guidance and support but are sometimes simply forgotten.

"Boys II Men appeals to those in the middle, and it attracts those who want to do better, regardless," he said.

Founded in 2002 with only 12 charter members, Boys II Men was set up to offer young Black and Latino men alternatives to the gang violence that had taken hold in East Aurora, IL. It is sponsored by East Aurora Weed and Seed, which gave the program \$6,744 last year as part of a special emphasis grant.

The program emphasizes five core principles—discipline, education, culture, brotherhood, and service—to inspire the youth to excel in their development. Today, the program has more than 70 official members and hundreds attend its community workshops and activities.

Every other Sunday, members meet to discuss different issues, ranging from how to respect women to how to stay out of gangs. They work with their mentors, and then serve as mentors to elementary school students. They also tutor their peers, organize youth events, and even work with legislators to develop statewide legislation for youth. The program is establishing a type of positive peer pressure, according to Muhammad.

"It's like birds flocking together," he said. "There are more kids doing right."

Boys II Men tries to bridge the racial divide between Black and Latino males and enforces equal representation in the fraternity, prompting a healthy competition in recruitment to keep the numbers even.

"Discipline is the best gift that a man can give himself, and education is the greatest equalizer," said Jared Marchiando, a Black member and one of the 12 charter members. "With these two principles, Black and Latino males can truly understand their cultures and realize that we are one brotherhood. Then we can be a true service to our community."

Workshops held over the past year have included the following: 19 Steps to Becoming a Phenomenal Young Man, College Preparation through Middle School and High School, Overcoming Obstacles and Adversity, The History of Hip-Hop, Dress to Impress and for Success, The Making of a Gang Member, Proper Male and Female Relationships, Financial Management, and Stereotypes of Black and Latino Males and How to Combat Them.

Muhammad maintains a robust e-mail list of his members and their families. Some parents are very involved and others less so, Muhammad said, but they are supportive.

Gang colors are shunned by fraternity members, but Boys II Men is proud to show off its name. It has emblazoned T-shirts, key chains, lanyards, jackets, and sweatshirts with its look. "Change Your Mind, Change Your Life," the official motto of Boys II Men, also resonates with its members.

"It's that simple to get and stay on the right track," said Joel Donatlan, a Latino member of the fraternity since 2002. "All we have to do is make the decision in our mind that we are going to do better, and our entire life changes for the better," he said.

In June 2005, the fraternity's first four students graduated from high school. All four young men, some of whom were labeled "at risk," are now attending major 4-year colleges and universities throughout the country. Each one is majoring in elementary or secondary education and plans to come back to the Aurora area to teach.

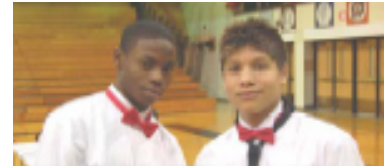
"'To whom much is given, much is required.' It is through Boys II Men that I really learned the meaning of this," said Errin Smith, a freshman at Hampton University in Virginia. "Once I get my own classroom, I am going to inspire students in droves to defeat the stereotypes and be phenomenal in everything that they do."



Boys II Men fraternity members meet for training



Boys II Men fraternity members plan for post-secondary education.



Boys II Men band members