

CJ Robbins is the coordinator for the Portland Black Male Achievement program.



PHOTO BY ARKADY BROWN

Role models wanted

Black youths in Portland are challenging men in their community to step up and become mentors

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

IF YOU GO

No Role Models
Saturday, Aug. 12,
11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.
Official program begins
at 11:30 a.m.

Catered by Dub's
St. Johns

Denorval Unthank
Park, 510 N Shaver St.

This Saturday, a group of young black men and boys are holding a community event called “No Role Models” at Unthank Park in North Portland’s Boise neighborhood.

The name says it all.

They want more black men in Portland to step up and fill the role-model void in their communities. They hope their event will draw both those interested in mentoring and youths looking for someone to look up to.

The organizers are participants in the city of Portland’s Black Male Achievement Summer Youth Experience, an opportunity offered to black males participating in Multnomah County and Worksystem’s summer job placement program for young people.

This year, about two dozen youths ages 15 to 24 embarked on the summer-long program that promotes personal growth and relationship building, and culminates with the youths putting together a community event on the topic of their choice.

Last summer’s community engagement project was a powerful program exploring how Oregon’s Measure 11 mandatory minimum sentencing law is affecting youths charged as adults.

Another effect that law and others like it are having on the African American community is fewer fathers, big brothers and uncles to serve as role models, say event organizers.

The event begins at 11 a.m. and will include speaker panels featuring the young men along with business leaders in the black community who have provided a mentorship role to the youths. Organizations that offer mentoring services, such as Unify Portland, will be on hand to sign up mentors and youths.

Street Roots discussed the need for more role models with one of the young men hosting the event and two of the Summer Youth Experience facilitators.

Emily Green: *This event is called “No Role Models.” Are you seeing that there is a lack of role models for young black men and*

boys in the Portland community?

Israel Hammond, youth organizer, age 21: Absolutely, and it’s not just in the Portland community. I feel like this is a nationwide epidemic to say the least, because it’s systemic – the system wasn’t built for the black man. It was built to do everything to destroy the experiences that we have. For me, it starts with the head of the household, who is typically the male. If you can get him out of the picture, then you have a whole bunch of issues and situations that arise; like a single mother having to take care of more than her load, therefore she’s not there, therefore the child does not have her, it just starts to snowball. In Portland, it’s because there is such a small minority group, or minority presence, it’s a lot more heavy.

Walter Robinson II, BMA Steering Committee: “No role modelz” is actually a lyric from (hip-hop artist) J. Cole, and it’s a really good song that talks about the culture of society and what some devastating legislation has done to communities – and how that system has created no role models for black young men. That song really inspired (the youths) to come up with that title, but also that’s how they feel. For some young individuals in our group, this is one of the only times where they feel comfortable enough – not only being black, but also being in a space with other positive black men looking to grow and grow together. I would say that the “no role models” comes out of the sense of challenging the community. There are men out there who want to be role models, but don’t have the connection to the youth. So it’s bringing everyone together to say, “Here’s what’s available. You can partner with these groups or do something on a more individual basis, just based off pure authentic relationship creating.” It’s also the opportunity for these young men to mentor other young men. So we have been reaching out to all these people to bring them together to talk about an issue that is plaguing our community.

E.G.: *Why aren’t there as many role models as there should be – are you talking about mandatory minimum sentencing and legislation like that?*

CJ Robbins, BMA program coordinator: I think it’s complex, and I think that’s why they boiled it down to one sentence and harken to J. Cole’s song. Because I think that’s a factor, but it’s one of many. Their title reminds me of the phrase: We are the heroes we’ve been waiting for – it essentially just reminds me that even with all the systemic barriers, there’s opportunity.

The song itself kind of highlights what that space looks like for a young man that’s trying to navigate the world that doesn’t see the people around him that should be around him. Obviously there’s Measure 11 and other legislation, the war on drugs, that have led to higher percentages of black and brown men in jail and not in their communities.

W.R.II: We’re not saying it has to be male specific, but that’s the work and space we live in (with the Black Male Achievement initiative). We’ve been very intentional in

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