



FAMILY / EDUCATION

Self Enhancement, Inc. Turns 20

continued from Front
nations. With close to 90 full-time staff members, SEI is also one of the largest employers of people of color in the community.

In its sixth year of operation, the building still looks and feels brand new. Hopson chalks it up to the discipline and self-respect children at SEI grow to expect from themselves and those around them.

The center has proved to serve a unique niche.

"I don't think you'll find another facility like this in another inner city," says Hopson. The building's sweeping halls and towering windows house a professional recording studio, gym, auditorium, state of the art sound system, and other amenities that young people appreciate and connect with.

SEI has grown into a comprehensive academic mentoring and monitoring program that reaches thousands of kids a year, from 2nd graders to 25-year-old men and women. The center serves students on a first come first served basis.

Lisa Manning, the community relations coordinator for SEI, said the program runs in school, after school, summers and Saturday's.

"It's all the time," she said. "It helps us keep contact with the kids."

SEI serves 11 north and northeast Portland schools. The primary high school is Jefferson. There is an SEI coordinator at each school that mentors 40-50 kids based on recommendations of teachers and SEI assessments.

After school, younger students are bussed to the facility. High school age kids come by themselves, 150-200 teens a night come on their own accord. Manning says the kids "see it as a prestigious thing."

Benchmark goals keep the students progressing from one level of achievement to the next. Kids accumulate points and are even rewarded monetarily to help with the costs of school supplies. Children involved with the program often quickly see improvements in grades. Behavioral referrals often decline as well. Many of the

kids graduate high school and go on to college.

The options are what's important. In fact that's the motto at SEI. "Life has options." To make that point, SEI has even brought out Nike to design shoes with kids just to show them that becoming the basketball player that wears the shoes is just one option, you could also become the designer that creates them. There is never only one path to success.

In addition to regular courses in academics and reading, there is a computer lab, classes in art, cooking, and dance. SEI also boasts music instruction at all levels. A partnership with PSU music camp puts pianos in the homes of two students each year. In gender education classes, young men and women talk about the implications of sex and drugs. They discuss the images of rap stars and the people they see on TV.

The level of intervention runs deep.

"We get the kids that are not motivated and underperforming," Manning explains. "We build a really strong relationship with them. We even go into the home and work with the parents and get them involved."

Manning says many of the kids do not wake up to a warm breakfast and hot shower. Often they come from abusive households, or even have parents incarcerated.

So it's not always just the kids that SEI helps. Sometimes it's the parents that need support. SEI boasts a comprehensive family services department.

"We have found furniture for people, helped pay bills, even rent," Manning said.

But it's the kids that remain the focus of long-term commitment that SEI offers.

Andre Lawrence, 21, got involved in the second grade and now he is preparing to enter his third year in college. He describes his time with SEI as "a long adventure."

Lawrence is on his way to the Oregon Institute of Technology in Klamath Falls to play basketball and major in applied psychology. He says SEI has been a place



Self Enhancement, Inc. kids admire a jersey worn by Magic Johnson. The jersey was auctioned Friday at a SEI golf tournament fund-raiser. PHOTO BY DAVID PLECHI/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

where he could always come to be off the streets.

"SEI teaches you to think about others," he says, "it has taught me to give back."

Lawrence says he is 100 percent sure he wouldn't be in college if it weren't for SEI.

"I did struggle a little in college," Lawrence said. "They (SEI) were there to pick me up, keep me going."

He says that some of his friends over the years have pushed SEI away and have gotten into gangs and trouble.

"Most of my real friends," Lawrence now says, "are in this building."

He says his mentors at SEI have been like parents.

"If you get into trouble, the first thing you think about is them," he explained.

Lawrence is now a mentor himself.

"Now I'm the one who gets on them about their grades," he says with a smile. "I come back to give to the kids what SEI gave to me."

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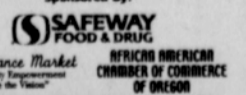
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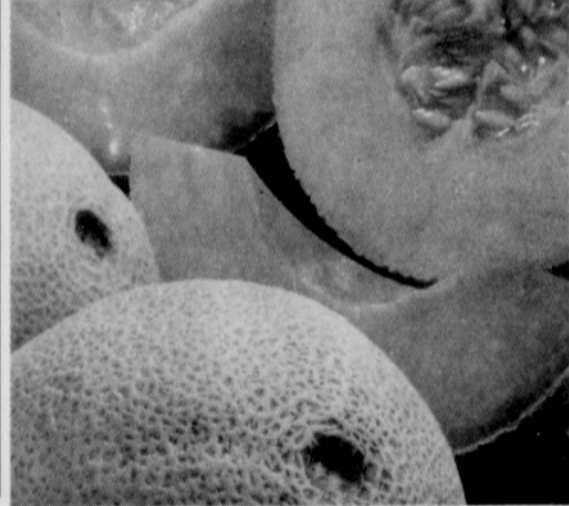
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