

Advocate Builds Community Ties

David Miller can't say 'no' to helping kids

BY JAKE THOMAS
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
(story)

David Miller has been doing outreach to troubled youth for just shy of two decades. During this time he's developed a basic rule for dealing with kids: He won't lie to them, he won't lie about them, and won't lie for them.

Young people already have to too many false promises, he said.

Miller has worked tirelessly to build enough trust to set troubled youth on the straight and narrow and make the city safer.

But Miller isn't in it for the praise.

Ever since the 46-year-old emigrated from Daytona Beach, Fla. to Portland at the behest of his sister, he's worked in various social services agencies beginning with the House of Umoja mentoring adolescent males.

He bounced around similar organizations, with his last gig being a gang specialist with the Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods. The funding for his position ran out in 2008, but Miller continued doing outreach on a volunteer basis.

"I knew that was my calling, to work with kids," said Miller. "I just can't say 'no' to kids who



PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
David Miller is committed to helping at-risk youth.

need my help."

As a TriMet Riders' Advocate, Miller works to diffuse explosive situations before they start.

He spends most of his work day, which is usually from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m., riding the bus and light rail, often times near high schools in northeast Portland. Kids rimming with energy after a long school day sometimes get rowdy, which is where Miller comes in.

Usually the presence of a Riders Advocate, wearing TriMet ball caps, is enough to deter would-be disruptive riders from acting out, or fights between adolescents from occurring.

But Miller has the added advantage of his long-established connections with youth and can use this rapport to ease a tense situation before the police have to get involved.

The Riders' Advocate team

was recently recognized by the City of Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement crime prevention program.

Mary Tompkins, the program's crime prevention coordinator, nominated the group for their success in keeping the peace.

"They are an excellent resource," she said. "They are available for spontaneous crisis."

Miller said his commitment to helping at-risk youth stems from his own experience growing up in Florida, and the lack of outreach available to impressionable adolescents.

"I just go back to when I was a kid," said Miller. "We didn't have these different avenues out there."

He added that it's especially vital to have positive adult figures in the lives of adolescents who may not have ideal home situations.

"A kid needs to be a kid, and when they don't have that father figure, kids, especially the males want to be grown at 15," said Miller.

Rough Patch for Social Services

continued from Front

on. That's not very bright."

He also has been encouraging the Legislature to reform two property tax measures approved by voters in the 1990s.

Measures 5 and 50 cap how much property assessments can rise. Wheeler said that this is problematic because tax rates are no longer tied to actual property value, and the county isn't getting all the tax revenue it should be.

Wheeler is also critical of the city's use of tax increment financing. This is a tool used by city governments where tax revenue from a designated district is diverted from county and municipal coffers and is used instead to support a specific project, like building a soccer stadium.

The financing instrument starves money away from the county and limits its ability to provide basic service, and has no say in when or where its used, said Wheeler. He's been supporting a bill that would give the county a say before the city government can use it.

"I want those pet projects weighed against core services," said Wheeler.

Wheeler also mentioned that the county has also been working to reduce recidivism and get former offenders jobs, and has also partnered with the federal government on a project to reduce the health inequities based on race.

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