

A Life Skills Academy

'Urban Bridges' builds confidence

BY DREW DAKESSIAN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

On the corner of Northeast Prescott Street, there is a bridge unlike the many other bridges present in the city. This one does not straddle water, but rather links who disadvantaged youth with their greater potential.

The place is Urban Bridges, a non-profit life skills academy started by local modeling instructor Patricia Feathers in 2006, where kids are taught to respect themselves and others by learning good manners and confidence.

Children are divided into what Feathers has determined to be age-appropriate classes, which run for five-weeks. At the end of the class, Feathers takes the kids on a field trip to Stanford's Restaurant at the Lloyd Center, where they put their newfound knowledge about dining etiquette to use.

The majority of participants are male, which Feathers explains is because once young men reach high

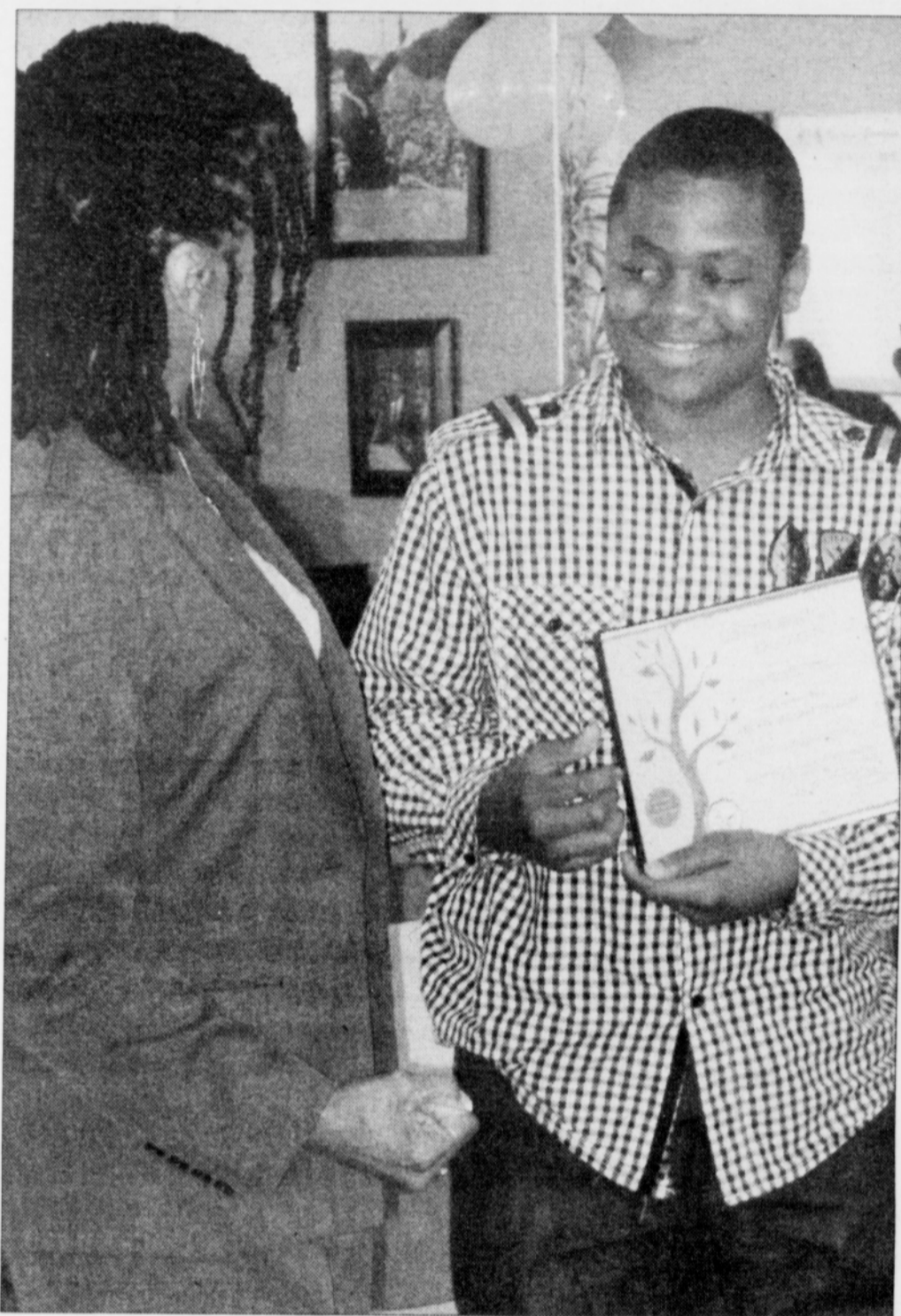


PHOTO BY DREW DAKESSIAN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Kelvin Bellum receives his certificate of graduation from Urban Bridges founder and director Patricia Feathers.

school they are at risk of succumbing to gangs. When they enter the program, they slouch in their chairs, are clad in sloppy attire and banter in language laden with street slang. But by graduation, they have undergone dramatic metamorphoses.

At a graduation ceremony for one summer class, 14-year-old Kelvin Bellum is behaving strangely. His clothes are clean and pressed and his persona seems to be that of a perfect gentleman, but he is clutching at the leg of his pants, hobbling around the academy. Feathers reveals that Kelvin had just been bitten by a pit bull, and while he sustained no lasting injuries, there now is a hole in his pants. But Kelvin has just spent five weeks learning that a respectful gentleman wears only clothes that are intact, so he has been trying to conceal the hole.

Laughing, Feathers explains to him that given the circumstances, there is an exception to this rule. At this, Kelvin removes his hand from his pants, and stands ramrod.

"Our children learn a lot of really valuable skills here," says Feathers, pointing to a picture of a six-year-old boy striking a pose, who went on to make it big in Hollywood. "He has a lot of charisma, very outgoing...he has no problem in California," says Feathers.

Girls likewise benefit from Urban Bridges and its variety of offerings,

which include modeling classes, personal grooming tips, and job interview training. At the graduation ceremony, Lundyn Warren's poise is perfect, and she carries herself with aplomb well beyond her 12 years.

Unlike other finishing schools, says Feathers, Urban Bridges is a non-profit. Though there is a fee, at \$300, it is comparatively low.

"We never turn a family away because they cannot afford it," she says, as long as "they can prove that they really are having a financial hardship."

Feathers and her husband often pay out-of-pocket to put needy children through the academy and to fund the academy at large. For that reason, Feathers says, she is "desperately trying to find funders, donations, and board members that just love children."

In these hard economic times, willingly going "into the hole" is practically unheard of. But Feathers says the impact that Urban Bridges can have on a child, and by extension, a whole community, is worth it.

"It's truly a passion and a dream come true. I always wanted to give back to children and help them to be...the best...that they can possibly be."

For more information, call Urban Bridges at 503-493-9436 or visit UrbanBridges.org.

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Illegal Guns

continued ▲ from front

clude people who have been convicted of illegal firearm use for areas of the city where the problem is particularly acute- with some variances.

"The illegal use of firearms is a long-standing community in the City of Portland. Changes to federal and state gun laws are needed," said Adams in a prepared statement.

Adams mentioned that firearms are primarily regulated at the state and federal levels, leaving local governments with few resources. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Chicago's ban on hand guns was essentially unconstitutional, significantly limiting the ability of local governments to regulate firearms.

"In the meantime, due to lax gun safety law, cities like Portland get caught in the crossfire: literally and tragically," Adams added.

For the next two weeks, Adams will be soliciting input for the initiatives before drafting ordinances that will be drafted into ordinances and brought before City Council. Dur-

ing that time he is soliciting public comment, which can be sent to mayorsam@portlandoregon.gov by Sept. 3.

Shortly after Adams made the announcement, the Oregon Firearms Federation released a particularly venomous statement opposing the initiatives. Calling the mayor's proposals a "PR stunt" that violates state law, the organization predicted that they would backfire.

There is already a law on the books that places a curfew on teenagers.

Although the exact language of the initiatives is being hammered out, the City of Portland has run into problems in past years with drug or prostitution-free zones that attempt to exclude anyone associated with those activities from a given area. Critics have decried that approach as not only ineffective, but unconstitutional, and challenged them in court.

One of the initiatives that excludes people who've violated gun laws from areas suffering from high gun crime could be similarly challenged.