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Oakland center guides youths out of trouble *Executive director to receive humanitarian award at tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.*

By Cecily Burt, STAFF WRITER

BERKELEY - DAVID MUHAMMAD got some lucky breaks when he was in high school, breaks that probably saved his life.

With a minuscule grade point average, a habit of rolling dice when he should have been in class and a few serious brushes with the law, he was priming himself for a life behind bars. But a high school teacher and the Omega Boys Club threw out a lifeline, and he grabbed it.

Eighteen years later, as executive director of The Mentoring Center, Muhammad is throwing out lifelines of his own in an effort to help youth who are struggling with school, family, drugs, anger, gangs and other issues that prevent them from recognizing their potential.

Today Muhammad, 32, will receive Oakland's third Citizen Humanitarian Award at an evening musical tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. at the Scottish Rite Center. Former U.S. Rep. Ron Dellums will deliver the keynote address, and musical performances will feature Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir, the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir, the new Oakland Children's Community Choir and special guests Madeline Eastman and Faye Carol.

The Mentoring Center was created in 1991 to serve as a training provider for Bay Area mentoring programs. Since then the center has expanded to include mentoring, intervention and transition services for youth serving time in California Youth Authority institutions or Juvenile Hall before they are released.



David Muhammad, executive director of The Mentoring Center, shares his experiences struggling with school and home life with a group of Berkeley High School students during a weekly Positive Minds On Location meeting. The mentoring program works to motivate youth who are failing school, having problems at home or getting in trouble with the law.

The center also operates a Positive Minds Group meeting at its Oakland offices for former offenders and others referred by the courts or social service agencies, and a Positive Minds Group On Location meeting at high schools in Oakland, Berkeley and Richmond.

The center is the lead agency for Oakland's federally funded Project Choice program that works with serious and violent youth offenders before their release from CYA. The center is also the lead agency for Pathways to Change, a city and county-funded program that works with repeat juvenile offenders to reduce relapse.

Altogether, the center runs 13 different meetings a week.

Muhammad, Munta Mbonisi, Baayan Bakari and other program directors use simple, inspirational messages that resonate with the youth: "Most people live from the outside in, but masters live from the inside out." "If you want what you've never had before, you have to do what you've never done before." "If you fail to plan, your plan is to fail."

"Brother Baayan was talking about ... having to change your perspective, to visualize your goal and see it," said 17-year-old senior Carrie Oliver about the first time she attended a Positive Minds Group meeting on the Berkeley High School campus. "I felt like he was talking directly to me."

Oliver's reaction is not unique. Although many students referred to the program are in danger of being expelled, and may have been in and out of juvenile hall, most have registered improvement in their behavior and grades after getting involved with Positive Minds. They have looked to the future, become more self aware, set goals and raised their self esteem.

Some students attending the meetings these days were dragged along by their friends. Although they resisted at first, they are no longer sorry they came.

"My friends said, 'Carrie, you should come with me to PMG.' I said no, but they said they were not taking no for an answer," said Oliver, who said she enrolled at Berkeley High after being kicked out of St. Elizabeth.

The center has been running meetings at Berkeley High for three years. Oliver's friend James Strickland, 17, has attended PMG meetings there since September 2004, the beginning of his sophomore year.

His anger was out of control. His grade point average below 1.0 and showing no signs of rising. His report cards had been

dotted with Fs since the seventh grade. He said he almost killed his little brother in a fit of rage.

"I had a lot of problems. I was angry at my family -- I have one of the most dysfunctional families in America," he said. "I was going to drop out freshman year but my (older) brother told me he'd hurt me if I did."

Strickland's GPA started to go up. It was "1.2-something" last year, he said. Now it is 2.8 and he plans to go to community college and later transfer to a university and perhaps major in engineering.

He has been asked to be a motivational speaker and the friends he used to hang with have started viewing him as a different kind of role model, one who goes to class, controls his anger and sets goals for himself. Some of those friends have come to PMG.

His life is not all rosy. He lives with his aunt and younger brother, while his older brothers and sister struggle with their own lives and demons. But for the first time in a long time, he said, he's happy.

"Wednesdays here are like my Fridays," he said. "I like Wednesdays so much because of PMG. You can try to walk in a straight line but there are always distractions. Coming here keeps me on track."

Mbonisi, director of programs for The Mentoring Center, refers to the meetings as preventive medicine that helps them resist bad influences, survive family crises, or deal with unhealthy situations they cannot avoid.

"It's like an inoculation or vaccination," he said. "They have to go back into their negative environment when they leave, and they have to come back the next week for another vaccination."

Whether he's speaking at Berkeley High, CYA or to the weekly group of ex-

offenders who are struggling to turn their lives around and avoid going back to jail, Muhammad can relate to them and they to him.

His parents divorced when he was three, and he was in foster care by the time he was a sophomore. He remembers vividly the day the phone rang and it was one of his older brothers calling from jail, busted for selling drugs. Muhammad was in sixth grade.

He could have followed that same destructive path but a series of events placed him in a Black Studies class at Oakland Tech, taught by Wayne Brooks, who became his mentor. He was referred to the Omega Boys Club Street Soldiers program, which back then ran a mentoring program in Oakland.

He remembers one message that he uses to this day: The young people aren't bad.

They just suffer from bad examples, bad advice, bad instruction.

Then, as now, the message was delivered by people who had been through similar experiences. Muhammad said the youths' main problem is attitude, not ability.

"Everyone in here has unlimited potential," Muhammad told the Berkeley students. "The question is what will you do with your potential. ... Don't waste it; control what goes into your mind because what you put in it is what you'll get out of it."

Tonight's fifth annual musical tribute "In the Name of Love," honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., will be held at the Oakland Scottish Rite Center, 1547 Lakeside Drive, 7:30 p.m. For more information visit www.mlktribute.com.