

Mentoring program will connect caring adults and hurting kids



Many teens feel they have no one in their lives who care about them. HoJo photo

By Nancy Brewer

A survey made at Lawrence County High School recently asked students to name the worst problem they have in their lives. Teachers and administrators expected anything besides the most common answer: "Their number one problem was that they felt nobody cares about them," said Principal Mickey Dunn. "We were just blown away by that."

Dunn spoke to a group assembled at Immanuel Baptist Church in Lawrenceburg, where members are supporting a new mentoring program being organized by Youth Pastor Steve Seaton and others.

Seaton's involvement began with the I AM 4 kids program, which provides support to children in local schools and the court system. It was begun by resident Theresa Beck as a non-profit ministry several years ago and is serving as a starting point for the mentoring program. Dunn says I AM 4 kids has provided "an ear to listen and a kind heart" to many at his school.

Too often, they don't find those things at home. "For many kids, the best thing they go home to is an empty house, because if somebody's there, nothing good's going on," he said. "I've always said if we could go home with

them in the afternoons, we'd understand them a lot better."

He added that he recently counseled a boy who was sent to his office angered to the breaking point. He was a good student, with good attendance, but "was full of seething animosity." He finally told Dunn that he "hated everybody, because no one in his life cared about him."

"We've got a lot of kids like that at Lawrence County High School. We've got a lot of kids like that at Loretto High School, and at Summertown High School. We've got a lot of kids like that across the state and across the nation."

Jamie Rouse committed one of the nation's first school shootings in 1995 at nearby Richland High School. Dunn said he visited Rouse in prison to talk with him about how the tragedy might have been averted.

"He said if his parents had shown him that they cared about him, even that day, it would have stopped him. His parents were the only people who could have stopped him."

Rouse wanted his own life to end and "wanted to go out in style," Dunn said. "He never thought he would come out of it alive. He thought someone would kill him to end it."

Once he began his lifetime prison sentence, a preacher introduced him to the idea of unconditional love and forgiveness. "He didn't know about those things. He didn't really think there was a God, and if there was, he hated him."

Rouse has since been saved, and so have his parents. His father was an abusive alcoholic, however, and like all children, Rouse based his ideas about God on his father.

Seaton said he is "astounded by the epidemic of absent or abusive fathers." He said fathers fall into one of five categories: Absent, Super-achiever (who sets impossibly high standards for his children), Passive (physically there, but emotionally unavailable), a Time-bomb (prone to unpredictable anger) and Compassionate Mentor (who admits mistakes and is available to his children). All but the last, he said, create low self-esteem and anger in their children.

The new mentoring program will "fill in the gaps - be fathers to the fatherless and mothers to the motherless." Mentors will spend three hours a week with a child for at least a year following a comprehensive screening and training program.

Kids will sign up for mentoring but must have

their parents' permission to participate, Seaton said. Their interests and

the potential mentor's will be taken into consideration so the adult and child can share time together doing things they both enjoy.

Mentors will have to be committed, and patient, said Dunn. He compared the work to a former neighbor who fed birds and squirrels from his hands. "Can you imagine how many hours he sat there before they came to eat from his hand the first time?"

"You have to let kids know they're cared about, and that's not easy. They have to come to you, but once they do, then you can show them unconditional love."

Seaton has been trained by Navigators and the Christian Association

of Youth Mentors, and is basing the local program on its work. The goal of "I AM 4 kids" is not to build up an organization, he said, but to connect healthy, caring mentors with hurting children.

If you are interested in getting your church involved in mentoring the training and resources are free. Local schools can also get involved by referring the student and parents long before it has to reach the court system. "Mentoring is a win-win situation for both the hurting child and those interested in getting involved," Seaton said. You may call Steve Seaton at 931-349-8302 or Theresa Beck at 629-2306.

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