

'Explorers' helps direct at-risk youth

By Lindsay Marshall
Democrat writer

Joseph Jones is an eighth grader at Fairview Middle School, one of many young black males identified as at-risk for dropping out of high school. Jones, along with 41 other at-risk young men from around the state, participated in the Black Males College Explorers Program this summer at Florida A&M University.

"It's a good experience," Jones said. "They're showing us how to be more mature and man-like instead of acting like a fool and going to jail."

The Black Males College Explorers Program started in 1989 under Frederick Humphries, FAMU's eighth president. He saw the program as a way to play a greater role in young students' lives.

Tommy Mitchell, currently in his second term as FAMU National Alumni Association president, was the founding director of the program and led it for 17 years. Edward Tolliver heads up the program today.

"I put my name in the hat and it's my sixth summer doing this," he said.

After starting at FAMU, the program eventually traveled to Florida's other three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): Edward Waters College, Bethune-Cookman University and Florida Memorial University.

During the six-week summer session, the students are taught both life skills and academics, such as reading, writing and math, in order to encourage them to complete high school and go on to earn a college degree.

"Back in the late '60s, early '70s, one of the first things we learned was respect," Tolliver said. "Those teachers instilled how to make you a bet-

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ter citizen."

In addition to respect, these students are taught how to eat healthily and dress appropriately.

"Part of what we teach the boys are dress and appearance," Tolliver said. "Perception matters. I have to tell these kids to pull up their pants every day, but at the end when they're looking good it's worth it."

The young men even had their blood pressure and Body Mass Index taken by a team from Capital Regional Medical Center and sent to their parents, as many may not have the opportunity access to health care regularly.

However, academic enrichment is still one of the main focuses of the program.

"They show us different ways to read, write and do math, and they also teach us how to do good on our FCATs, SAT and ACT tests," Jones said.

Tolliver said that they encourage the students to work with their teachers and ask questions and continue to do the same in college.

This summer, a total of 137 students participated in the Black Males College Explorers Program across Florida. With 42 students, FAMU had the highest attendance.

All 137 students traveled to Atlanta where they visited the Georgia Aquarium, saw an Atlanta Braves baseball game, visited the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site and attended service at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Jones said the trip to Atlanta was the best part of the summer. Tolliver agreed, adding that the group received many compliments for being well-mannered.

"It was very uplifting," Tolliver said. "They're writing reflections on the trip. This is another way to reach these young men, through visitations to the MLK Site in Atlanta. We like to have fun. I don't do anything unless it's fun or educational, and sometimes it's both."

After his experience with the Black Males College Explorers Program, which ends with a ceremony in FAMU's Grand Ballroom tonight, Jones anticipates receiving a diploma from Rickards High School and eventually earning a college degree.

"They want us to take what we learn to our families so we can be role models in the community," Jones said. "It's a good program and more people should get involved."

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