

Jericho Road Project of Concord offers mentoring program for Lowell youth

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By Amy Carboneau/Staff Writer
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Concord — **YouthBuild** Lowell has decided to venture down a new road... Jericho Road.

Last month, through a process similar to speed dating, Concord residents were matched in **Jericho Road Project's** pilot mentorship program with Lowell teens, to provide encouragement and leadership for the disadvantaged youth of Lowell.

"That's where we come in," said Dan Holin, executive director of the Concord-based Jericho Road Project.

The Jericho Road Project generally works to build connections between non-profits and professionals, to strengthen social services and communities by using people's talents and job experiences.

"But this is a different gig for us in that we're not necessarily matching people's expertise," said Holin, "but their passions."

In looking for mentors, Holin reached out to churches of various faiths throughout Concord, and found 22 volunteers to offer their time — two days a month for two hours at a time for 15 months. With those time constraints, the effort proved tougher than he imagined, said Holin.

"We literally sent thousands of fliers," said Holin. "But the good news is, we got the number of people we wanted."

"It's kind of a multi-faith effort from Concord to meet the needs of Lowell youth," added Holin. "We're trying to bring these two cities together to raise the quality of life in Lowell by strengthening their nonprofit community...and also bring Concord and Lowell together."

Many people who came forward did so simply because they wanted to provide support. Others stepped up as a role model for their own children.

Laurine Verrilli is a mentor and mother of three, who joined the program to show her kids a different life than the one they know, and because the opportunity was available to help.

"Because it involved teenagers and it was just an opportunity for them to turn their lives around and to better their situation," said Verrilli. "You know, we're all victims of circumstance."

But despite circumstance, Lowell youth are turning out in droves for this program. Out of 300 youth who apply to YouthBuild each year, only 40 get into the program.

"It's just impressive that it's not their parents making them do it, or the state making them do it," said Verrilli. "It's their own personal motivation. And they seem very excited to have mentors to have someone to help them."

Still other mentors are using the opportunity to prolong parenthood, coupling together to provide guidance and hopefully a mirror of self-worth.

Husband and wife, Bill and Hilary Midon offered to be volunteers after reading about the opportunity in a church bulletin at Holy Family Parish. Recently empty nesters, Bill said they are excited to bring more teens into their lives.

"Do I believe I can have an impact? I don't have any idea," said Midon. "I'm there to simply be supportive."

"I guess the compelling thing to me," added Midon, "was that the dropout rate at Lowell High School is 50 percent... it takes your breath away."

"You know, it's 20 minutes away from Concord, and you're in a place that arguably isn't even recognizable," he said. "I'm a huge believer in human potential... there's just no reason in the world that they're not getting a high school degree."

YouthBuild is a highly selective program that works to motivate Lowell youth dropouts, ages 17 to 24, by offering educational opportunities, job training, and leadership development. Youth often use the program to work toward a GED, and develop skills for a future job.

"Now what they're doing is complementing all that good work with a mentoring program," said Midon.

"These kids having a sense that somebody believes in them, I hope that gives them a sense of self-worth," said Midon. "Having a certain form of hope and self-worth with a vision gives them an opportunity to try to make something happen."

"And when they're doubting themselves," said Midon, "they have a phone number to call."