
Mentors called key to steering kids straight

By ZACK COLMAN
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

It took a drug conviction and prison term before Marcus Lee Brown finally understood.

"That's when I realized, 'Marcus, you have got to stop,'" said Brown. "If you don't, you will end up in jail the rest of your life."

Brown, 27, found guidance while in prison, and now he's trying to make sure that other young people don't make the same poor decisions he did.

He mentors them through Release Ministries, one of 11 programs featured Saturday at Westroads Mall for the Omaha area's first Mentor Fair.

Deborah Neary, executive director of the Midlands Mentoring Partnership, said about 100 people at the fair expressed interest in becoming mentors.

Daniel Padilla, board president for the partnership, said South Omaha and northeast Omaha have the greatest need, but local programs often have trouble attracting volunteers.

"We need more minority mentors ... especially in those areas," he said.

Padilla said mentors can give

young people who are in difficult home situations guidance and direction away from violence.

"We have to improve the conditions here," he said. "We have to take the kids off guns and off the streets."

Padilla said gun violence is "getting normal. We don't want that."

Sheryl Lindau, director of organizational development with Big Brothers Big Sisters, said many volunteers feel uncomfortable mentoring in neighborhoods with higher crime rates. But those communities need mentors the most, she said.

Brown said he wasn't afraid to live in a tough neighborhood. In fact, he said, he's built a home in a tough neighborhood.

"I put my life where all the craziness was happening to make a change, and it's happening," he said.

"I do it because I took from the community for so long and this is my way of giving back."

For more information on becoming a mentor, go to www.buildingbrightfutures.net.

Contact the writer:
444-1545, zack.colman@owh.com