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Mentors provide web of support

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DURHAM - Carlos Thompson's life has been turned upside down.

It's a good thing.

Since January, the 18-year-old has gotten a job as a grocery cashier, graduated from high school and made plans for college. For the first time in his life, he has started to feel like, well, "the man," he says.

He owes it all to his mentor through Partners For Youth, he said Thursday, as the program marked 10 years of helping teens in the Bull City.

Thompson's role model, DeWarren Langley, has done everything from text messaging the teen's cell phone with an 8 a.m. wake-up call to taking him to open a bank account. Ask Langley, and he'll say he helps the teen because someone did the same for him, through the very same program.

Partners For Youth is a program for southwest central Durham teenagers who, judging by their demographics, are more likely to let poor academic achievement, drugs or other influences detract from their futures. Since 1998, the effort has been leading teens from the West End neighborhood -- one of Durham's most crime-ridden -- to academic success and promising careers.

The initiative began with 13 students as part of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership, an effort endowed by Duke University to improve lives in the neighborhoods surrounding the institution.

Langley was just 14 then, he recalls. The oldest child in a single-parent home, he had dreams but no way to achieve them. He learned about Partners For Youth and thought of it as a way to escape the distractions of Morehead Avenue, where he saw neighbors deal drugs, go to prison and even die.

"It was a challenge to focus," said Langley, now 23.

He applied to the program and was accepted. The opportunity opened up a world he had never known.

Students enroll in the program for five years, graduating when they have turned 19 or completed their first year of college.

Participants are matched with four mentors: one in the community for everyday matters, one at school, one college student for tutoring twice a week, and a mentor at the student's summer internship, who can provide career support.

During the school year, as many as 25 participants venture to places many have not seen -- the theater, college campuses, the White House. They attend monthly meetings to learn about



DeWarren Langley, left, a graduate of Partners For Youth, mentored Carlos Thompson, who has graduated from high school and made college plans.
Staff Photo by Robert Willett

everything from job interviews to money management. Their participation earns them a paid internship for the summer and opens more doors for the future.

Jamechya Duncan, 18, just finished her first year in business marketing at N.C. Central University. She was one of four students who graduated from Partners For Youth on Thursday.

"I'm sad that I'm graduating," she said with a hesitant smile. "I'm supposed to be happy. But I know I can still call anyone at PFY if I need anything."

The evening was also bittersweet for the family of graduate Calvin Richmond, who died last week after a lifelong battle with a bowel disease.

Over the past 10 years, 27 participants have graduated from high school and 23 have gone on to college, said Leigh Bordley, the program's executive director and newly elected member of the Durham school board. The initiative has gone from being a facet of Duke University to a free-standing non-profit based at the Lyon Park community center with a \$100,000 annual operating budget, Bordley said.

But reflecting over 10 years, "The most significant thing is we really are seeing people going through the program come back and contribute to the program," Bordley said.

Langley is an example, she said. After graduating from Jordan High School, Langley went to Hampton University in Virginia and has returned to Durham to start law school at NCCU. A product of the program, he now is the vice chairman of its board of directors.

In just six months, it appears Langley has also helped make big changes in his protege, Thompson.

"I care about my future, I care about how I spend my time, and about what effect I leave on other people," Thompson said. "I feel a lot better about myself when I look in the mirror."

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