

Black/Hispanic Achievers Program at YMCA prepares students for adult life

BY MARGARET BRILLER

Building leadership skills in teens during the years they're seeking peer acceptance is difficult, but Viola Rembert and a dedicated team of adult mentors are up to the task.

Rembert, director of community services for the YMCA of Greater Cleveland, oversees the Black/Hispanic Achievers Program that encourages all students — with a focus on African American and Hispanic students — to pursue higher education and career goals. Current statistics show low graduation rates and college entrance for these two populations locally and nationally.

The Black/Hispanic Achievers Program strives to have an impact on those numbers. According to Rembert, it's about teens becoming more empowered in their career choices, especially choices beyond traditional careers. Students are encouraged to make decisions by putting them in leadership roles within the program that will give them the tools necessary to achieve in the future.

"This is why I love my job so much," Rembert said. "The YMCA has the tools to partner with schools, businesses and other groups to assist students who want to go to college prepare themselves."

The achievers program connects teens from grades 8 through 12 with caring adult achievers and proactive corporate sponsors that are looking for ways to impact their future work force.

Adult achievers' mentors are recognized each year at the annual recognition and scholarship luncheon, which honors African American and Hispanic adults from the community who serve as positive role models for students within the program. The luncheon also raises funds



The Black/Hispanic Achievers Program teaches leadership and empowerment. Students attended a youth rally in Washington, D.C.

to support scholarships for students interested in going to college.

"Mentoring makes such a difference in a child's life," Rembert stated. "Statistics from a national mentoring organization indicate that 46 percent of students who are mentored are less likely to do drugs; 59 percent are more likely to get better grades; 73 percent are more likely to raise their goals; 64 percent develop a more positive attitude toward school; 58 percent achieve higher grades, and 60 percent improve relationships with adults. There's proof that if we work with kids in the right way, then it will have a positive impact."

It offers students a jump start on their future as well as developing a positive self-image and character. Students can participate in a number of activities that can help them reach their goals. Career clusters in business, engineering, science, law and government and others give student hands-on exposure into the real world of work. Teen court and the youth in government programs allow students to learn from actively being

involved in those fields. Students take on the roles of those careers and learn first-hand about being engaged citizens who can have an impact on things that happen in their communities. The only requirement a teen must have to enroll in the program is a desire to achieve.

The program engages 200-500 students annually, according to Rembert. "That number reflects the number of students participating in different events that take place throughout the year, with an average of 30 teens in our core group of the achievers program," she said.

Rembert stressed the importance of the Black/Hispanic Achievers Program as a way to connect entities of the community to support young people so they can reach their goals. "After all, they are our future." If we don't ensure their success now, it will add up to our failures in the future. **R**

For more information and how you can help, call the YMCA at 216-263-6859.