
At-risk teens embrace their new chance to succeed

By Brian R. Ballou

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Adrenaline coursed through Shane Hampton's body as he fled gunfire from a passing car on Geneva Avenue in Dorchester. He raced down a side street, approached a backyard fence, and gripped the top to jump over.

Suddenly, his left arm slacked and he fell to the ground. A bullet had lodged just above his elbow. Still, he was lucky.

"I was thinking that bullet could have hit me somewhere else," said Hampton, who was 16 at the time. "And things could be different."

Now 19, Hampton has fully recovered from the shooting, and he has become one of the success stories in a unique program called Second Chance School, which helps once-troubled teenagers earn their GEDs.

Expelled from Madison Park High School two years ago after he brought a knife to school, Hampton is one of 15 teens with similar backgrounds enrolled in the Second Chance School, which started in June and operates from the Dorchester Youth Collaborative in Fields Corner. The nonprofit agency has served at-risk youths in Boston for almost three decades.

Participants receive GED tutoring and \$100 a week in return for manual labor: keeping up the exteriors of 17 city-owned properties. After completing the program, participants enroll in Year Up, a one-year program that links them to job training, college, and internships. Five teens have already received their GED and five more, including Hampton, will take exams Feb. 12.

"This is the opportunity these kids never had before," said Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who conceived the program. "Some of these kids just need a little respect. It's a great way to engage them in meaningful employment, civic involvement, and responsibility."

A typical day at Second Chance School begins at noon. The participants meet at the Dorchester Youth Collaborative and travel to a property, where they typically work for three hours. They break for two hours and then receive three hours of GED tutoring.

"This teaches them consistency," said Kenny Hill, who supervises the program. "This is something that can lead to a career, and they realize that if you work hard and stay on the right track, it can open up opportunities."

This week, teenagers in the program traveled to Nightingale Street in Dorchester to remove snow from the sidewalk in front of a city-owned house. As they arrived in three vehicles, each person was handed a shovel. The snowbank was about 5 feet high and so thick that it made the sidewalk impassable. But in about an hour, they dug out a wide path and applied ice melt to finish the job.

J'Shaun Reddick, a stocky 19-year-old with cornrows, returned his shovel to the back of a van and said, "I think this program saved my life. I didn't have any plans and I was headed nowhere, because I dropped out of the 11th grade. I was able to get my GED last November and now I'm interviewing for jobs." Reddick is currently enrolled in the Year Up program.

Emmett Folgert, executive director of the Dorchester Youth Collaborative, said participants recently worked in sub-zero weather.

"It's taking kids off the streets, giving them a job, and helping them with their education in a very cost-effective way," he said.

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Second Chance School received a \$125,000 start-up grant from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a Washington D.C.-based organization that seeks to identify and replicate successful programs to help urban youth. Private donations fund the operating costs.

While Second Chance is considered one-of-a-kind nationally, another program funded by the Eisenhower Foundation, called Quantum Opportunities, got underway last March in Dorchester. Through Quantum Opportunity, 30 students from Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester receive tutoring, mentoring, and are required to do some form of community outreach. The students are enrolled until graduation. Quantum Opportunities exists in 20 cities.

“This is part of a larger picture of providing programs across various age ranges,” said Alan Curtis, president of the Eisenhower Foundation. “Our goal is to have all these services in the same geographical area, operating in the same neighborhoods.”

On Tuesday at Burke high school, a grand opening will be held for the Second Chance School and Quantum Opportunities programs. Hampton is scheduled to speak.

Hampton returned this week to Geneva Avenue to show a reporter where he was shot almost three years ago.

“I wake up now feeling good because I have somewhere safe to go, somewhere I love to go,” he said. “For a person like me, who came from a bad neighborhood, trying to turn my life around, that means a lot.”

When he was shot, one of Hampton’s fears was that he would never again be able to Krump — a frenetic urban dance style. Today, he continues to dance, with the bullet still lodged in his arm.

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