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## Program seeks to change young minds

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By Mike McDaniel



JACKSON, MS (WLBT) -

For these kids, it's an after school program filled with smiles and where rock always beats scissors, but to the folks behind it, it's so much more.

"Is it just another program, well it is, but it's a really good one," said Robert Langford, the executive director of Jackson's Operation Shoestring.

The organization is putting in place the Youth Safe Haven Program, a two part initiative focused on mentoring and building better relationships between neighborhoods and those who've sworn to serve and protect them.

"We have seen traditionally and this is not specific to Jackson, you can see this all over the state, big divide between low income communities and law enforcement," said Langford.

To help bridge that gap, Langford says the program is changing young lives by creating a place for youth to not only feel safe, but learn to trust and respect themselves, each other, their community and police officers like Fredric Suttles.

"I see that they are no longer fearful and that they are trusting," said Suttles.

Suttles is one of the mentors who've become more than just an officer, but a friend to kids who may be at risk. Suttles says a simple hug from a nine year old put it all in perspective; a sign of affection he never expected.

"That opened my eyes that this is really working. This is really something that is effective," said Suttles.

Langford says it can be just as effective across the state, all it takes is an advocate wanting to make a difference.

"What goes on here in this neighborhood can be replicated in your own community. It's really simple, it's not rocket science. What it takes is I think courage and being thoughtful," said Langford.

By targeting specific communities across the state, Langford and Suttles say the opportunity for change is there, but it starts will changing minds, young ones.

"We reap what we sow so let's start sowing good things for our whole community," said Langford.

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