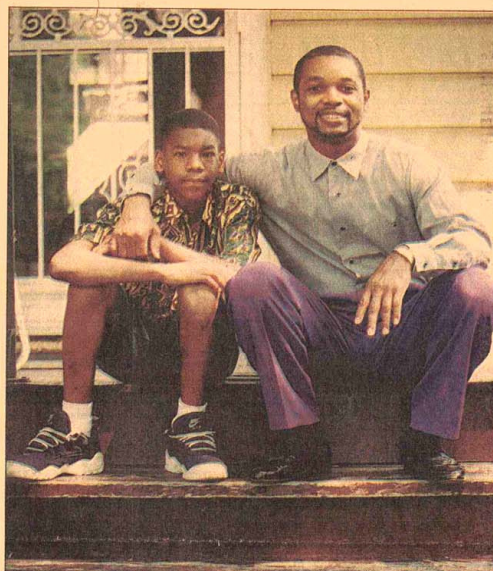


Role models



Bill Konway/Daily Southtown



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Joan Lachet/Daily Southtown

Sean Givens (above, left) sits on the steps at the home of his mentor, Rojay Banks (right). Lois Lewis, 15, (left photo) spends some time with her mentor, Debbie Gladney.

Mentor programs have quietly grown into a force for turning young lives around

By Meg McSherry
Staff Writer

Jean Jacques was a quiet eighth-grader living in a poor South Side neighborhood when he met Jacoby Dickens. At the time, he had no idea how much influence Dickens would have on his life.

At their introduction, backers of a mentor program called LINK Unlimited told Jacques that Dickens would be his "sponsor," a man who'd play an important role in his high school years.

They also mentioned that Dickens was the new chairman of the board for Seaway National Bank of Chicago, the largest black-owned bank in the Midwest. Jacques got the idea he was supposed to be impressed but wasn't sure why.

Over the next several years, he figured it out. Dickens paid four years worth of Jacques' tuition at De La Salle High School, an all-boys Catholic school in his neighborhood near Comiskey Park. He also got him internships at the bank and later became his full-time employer. Today, Jacques is Seaway's director of development.

"I've always looked to him as a role model," Jacques says of Dickens. "He always told me, 'Have a sound focus on something. With any kind of goal that you have, set a focus to it. Hold on to it.'"

Obviously, similar caring relationships such as the one Dickens forged with Jacques have existed for years in business and volunteer groups. But in recent years, the number of tutors and mentors has grown dramatically, transforming mentorship from a quiet, charitable gesture to an organized, growing movement to turn young lives around.

The number of tutor and mentor programs in the Chicago area grew from 41 to 120 from 1990 to 1994, according to a preliminary report by Illinois Wesleyan University researchers in Bloomington. And as many as 100 more programs were identified just in the past year for the researchers' next study, says Dan Bassill, who directed retail giant Montgomery Ward's tutor-

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Helping hand turns into guiding force

By Meg McSherry
Staff Writer

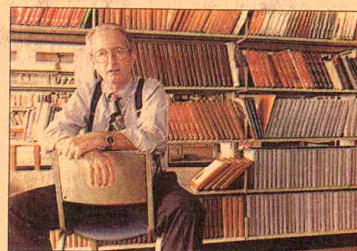
Dan Bassill first got excited about tutoring in the cafeteria check-out line at Montgomery Ward's corporate offices 23 years ago.

At the time, a co-worker he was attracted to suggested they join the company's program for residents of the Cabrini Green Housing project on the city's North Side.

Ward's corporate offices, at 535 W. Chicago Ave., were across the street from the housing complex and the company had started the program as a community service.

Before long, Bassill's first student, a fourth-grader from the housing project, had him hooked. By year's end, he was heading up the company's program for the entire staff.

Bassill remained committed throughout his career at Ward's — so much so that he decided to form his own men-



Bill Konway/Daily Southtown

Dan Bassill started out helping at a tutoring group at Montgomery Ward. Now he runs his own tutoring program.

tor group when he resigned in 1990. He now runs Cabrini Connections mentor program and another effort called the Tutor/Mentor Connection.

Bassill stays committed to tutoring and mentoring because he sees tremendous potential in the programs. The programs not only improve children's lives, but give the mentors a unique look into the myriad of problems facing the inner city, he says.

Through the Tutor/Mentor Connection, he hopes to coordinate tutor and mentor pro-

grams across the city so the volunteer effort becomes a professional, organized movement to change children's lives.

One of T/M C's first projects was an Illinois Wesleyan University study to track how many programs were actually alive. The researchers found a rapid growth in programs in the 1990s. From 1990 through 1994, the number of programs jumped from 41 to at least 120.

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Helping

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Today, Bassill says he's discovered scores more, and now thinks the number of existing programs is closer to more than 200.

He's still reaching out to find others. Bassill sponsored three conferences for program organizers. At the most recent meeting, leaders from 80 different groups came.

Bassill's group has also attracted donations from corporations and foundations. Yearly financial support increased from a single \$50,000 donation from Ward's in 1990 to \$160,000 in donations in 1995 from a variety of groups.

At Bassill's urging, the Chicago Bar Foundation recently created a

"Lend a Hand Fund" to provide initial grants of \$2,000 to \$5,000 for exemplary tutor and mentor programs. The foundation expects to make applications available as soon as it raises \$45,000 to get started, Bassill says.

The foundation set up an 11-member advisory board to assist in developing guidelines for exem-

plary programs. The Rev. Tom Paprocki, chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago, is a co-chair of the board and sees real potential in the effort.

"It has struck me that there are many programs being offered in all kinds of fields but at the same time, there are still many people who are in need," Paprocki

said. "We need to bridge the gap between rich and poor to bring the resources to those in need."

Bassill is encouraged by the new support, but says T/M C still has a long way to go. Based on estimates from Voices for Illinois Children, 200,000 children live in extreme poverty and high-risk neighborhoods in Chicago. But for now, the programs only reach

11,642 children — just 6 percent of the students in need, Bassill says.

So Bassill's work will continue. "There's no secret formula therefore our ability to draw from each other is the only way to fund these activities," he says. "We have a simple message: Who's out there, where are you and how can we help?"