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Elective class helps teen boys communicate, resolve conflicts and emulate role models

By Magdalena Wegrzyn
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LONGMONT — At the beginning of the semester, Emanuel Barr instructed the boys in his class to choose a new name.

For Caleb Nemnich, his nickname, "Rock," represents strength, courage and perseverance.

"Last year, I had a lot of stuff going on," said Nemnich, 14, who was in Barr's character enrichment class at Heritage Middle School last semester and is taking the class again. "I learned endurance — like stuff is hard, but you have to face it."

That's one of many life lessons Barr wants the eighth-grade boys in his class to absorb. The class, which Barr first taught in the spring semester, equips teenage boys to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts and emulate role models.

As director of NorthStar, a program of Alternatives for Youth, Barr facilitates the lessons — more as a mentor or friend than a teacher, he clarified.

His current schedule as the music and arts pastor at Rocky Mountain Christian Church only allowed him to teach eighth-grade boys, but he also reaches out to seventh-graders, encouraging them to join him at lunch and "talk about life."

Through a partnership between AFY and the St. Vrain Valley School District, NorthStar classes are offered as an alternative elective at Heritage. Starting next month, Barr will teach the same curriculum after school at Erie High School.

Classes are funded by the school district and several grants, primarily the Tony Grampsas Youth Services grant, which provided AFY with \$50,000 earlier this year to support life-skills training classes.

Before diving into the lesson on Tuesday, Barr called on his class to rattle off quotes they memorized during the past few days.

"Excuses are tools used by the weak to build monuments of nothingness. Those who use them seldom amount to anything," recited Luis "Lion Heart" Gutierrez, 13.

The morning ritual of repeating affirming and encouraging quotes sets students off on the right foot, Barr said. He also requires the boys to wear collared shirts and ties to school once a week — a positive rite of passage to become a man, he said.

He then asked the boys to write down their role models and share with the class.

Eduardo "Speedy" Sanchez, 14, spoke about his sister's influence.

"She cares about me," he said to the circle of peers around him. "She wants me to make it through high school and go to college because no one in my family has done that. So if I went, I'd be the first one."

Raised by his grandmother in southern Chicago, Barr didn't encounter many male role models while growing up. In middle school, three teachers stepped in to fill that void, leaving an indelible mark on the young man's life.

"They were all like, 'Hey Emanuel, you can do better. We know you can,'" he said.

Barr said he wants to help teens who might be struggling with similar issues of insecurity and doubt.

Jeffrey Fredman, vice principal at Heritage, said student achievement has increased for some boys after completing the class.

He pointed to an example last semester of two boys who tested out of a reading lab after they "got enough respect for themselves" to work harder.

Boys either opt to take Barr's class — seven of the 12 students currently in the class also took it in the spring — or they are referred by school administrators.

"The kids that I've recommended for this class actually have a lot of personality, passion and potential, and they're not channeling that in the right way," said the school's sole counselor, Brenda Everett, who oversees the class and helps Barr grade the boys on their behavior and weekly quizzes.

A male instructor changes the classroom dynamic and allows the boys to share in ways they wouldn't with their female teachers, she said.

And that's especially important for the "very transient population" at Heritage, she said, where last fall, 74.8 percent of students qualified for free and reduced lunch and 77.3 percent are minorities, according to reports by the Colorado Department of Education.

"There's just not enough places in our society for kids to hear positive messages," she said.

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From left: Jesus "Genius" Renteria, Luis "Lion Heart" Gutierrez and Miguel "Big Ups" Villalobos take part in Emanuel Barr's class at Heritage Middle School that instills leadership and values in boys. Once a week the students are required to wear ties to school. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**