



COURTESY OF ELEVATE ORLANDO

Elevating Our Youth

By Kevin Fritz

There are hundreds of stories of children in Orlando who face enormous odds to succeed. Abuse, abandonment, peer pressure, street violence, and gang affiliation can be a part of everyday life in urban areas of America — and the City Beautiful is no different. Thanks to a program working in conjunction with Orange County Public Schools, many at-risk urban students are now on paths to successful careers and leadership roles. The mentors and staff of Elevate Orlando (EO), a non-profit modeled after a 30-year program in Denver called Colorado UpLift, are driven to turn lives around.

Education and Curriculum Coordinator **LaQueta Farrow**, a mentor who previously worked with students at Colorado UpLift, says the biggest challenge is watching students believe they are unworthy of success simply because of where they come from. “There is nothing greater than seeing a student come to the realization that they are worthy of success,” she says. **Jim Patterson**, chief administration officer, says at-risk schoolchildren are identified via counselors, teachers, principals, and

sometimes other students. Currently, the program’s nine mentors teach elective classes at Evans and Oak Ridge high schools and the middle schools that feed them. In turn, those who are in the program at the high school level are required to teach what they are learning at the pipeline elementary schools. “That empowers the newest generation of urban leaders,” Patterson says.

Brandun Nguyen, EO’s sites coordinator, worked with Colorado UpLift before relocating to Orlando, and was mentored in UpLift as a struggling youth. He now mentors and oversees the entire pipeline — from elementary to high school — making sure the program is running the way it should. “We need to have a rapport with the kids,” he explains. “We need to find out what makes them tick to make them a success. That’s what makes this work.”

Now in its fifth year, EO serves more than 740 students and has become so popular, Evans High School has a waiting list of 100 students. EO boasts a 100 percent graduation rate among its high schoolers. The curriculum consists of leadership and

Elevate Orlando is making a difference one student at a time.

life skills, and the program’s 12 basic character qualities. “The failure rate is high with these students unless they are taught such skills,” he says. **Shannon McMiller** was relieved when her son **Ethan** became involved with EO. He was home-schooled most of his life, and she says he needed to develop a social life. Beyond the classroom, students participate in community service, have cookouts, go bowling or attend an Orlando Magic game. They also visit colleges. “He needed a positive influence outside of the house to respect and reinforce what we are trying to teach,” she says. The highly talented Ethan hopes to launch a music career, as well as work with the blind.

Patterson adds that the mentors are the crux of EO. On-call 24/7, the students have their assigned mentor’s cell phone number and are encouraged to use it. “It is a very intense job,” Patterson says. “We are on the front lines.” **L**

For more information about Elevate Orlando, visit our website at CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.