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Oklahoma City mentoring program teaches students life skills

The Y Achievers program needs more volunteers. All volunteers are interviewed and will undergo an OSBI background check before being allowed to start in the program. For more information, go to www.ymcaokc.org or contact Shannon O'Connor at 297-7728 or soconnor@ymcaokc.

By Jesse Olivarez - Staff Writer  0
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Mario Hernandez, a freshman at Santa Fe South High School, has his eyes on an opportunity that few in his family have ever had.

Hernandez, 15, said he has started making plans to go to college. Those plans have been bolstered in part thanks to a program offered at his school through the YMCA of Oklahoma City.

The Y Achievers program puts high school students in contact with mentors who work in a variety of professional fields. The goal is to get minority students prepared to go to college, said Shannon O'Connor, the YMCA'S director of Teen Leadership Initiatives.

"We're trying to get them early in high school and really start focusing them on going to college early because many of these students, not only are they going to be first generation college students, but also first generation high school graduates," O'Connor said.

The Y Achievers program asks mentors to come to a school for one hour a month to work with students and teach them skills that will help them later in life. Mentors teach students time management and different learning styles so that each student can get the most out of school.

Mentors also talk to students about their life experiences and what obstacles they overcame to get to where they are today.

The program kicked off at Santa Fe South four months ago, and teachers there said they have already noticed a change.

Lindsey McElvaney, a college counselor at Santa Fe South, said her students have started to carry around and use the daily planners given to them by the Y Achievers program. She said she hopes they continue to absorb the lessons they're getting.

“They're just starting to think about the future,” McElvaney said. “They always just live in the moment so it's good for them to be thinking about goals and things that are a few years away. That'll help them stay out of trouble.”

Cristian Ruiz, 15, said she began thinking about college a few months ago after her older sister started to pursue a degree in nursing. Ruiz said she doesn't know what she wants to do when she gets out of high school, but she knows she definitely wants to go to college.

Hernandez said his mother was able to attend college but his father didn't get to go because he had to work to support his younger brothers and sisters.

Hernandez, an aspiring psychologist, said he's paying close attention to the tips he receives through the Y Achievers program so that he can make the most of the opportunity he has.

“It has helped me be prepared for college and learn how to study good,” he said. “I've learned to always be organized, always be on time and never give up.”



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