



MY BROTHER'S KEEPER –

Changing the Narrative

By Pat Fontana

Working with students to develop the tools they need so they can reach their full potential is the natural goal of secondary education programs. Young people at the middle school and high school level are preparing for the next steps in their lives, whether that be college, technical school, or a fulfilling career position. Young men of color, though, often are at a disadvantage in this scenario.

In 2014, President Barack Obama recognized the struggles that many boys and young men of color face in their adolescence. He launched a program called My Brother's Keeper (MBK) designed to address the persistent gaps in opportunities for these young men, with the goal of ensuring that all youth are able to reach their full potential.

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In April 2016, New York became the first state to accept the president’s challenge, including sufficient funds in the 2016-2017 budget to support the program. As of the fall of 2021, the MBK network in the state had grown to include 31 communities.

BUILDING MEN

The Syracuse City School District is one of those communities that adopted the MBK program early on. Joe Horan, then a middle school physical education teacher, had started a Building Men Program several years earlier. Horan had been through some challenging times himself and says he “realized I had a lot to learn to be a man.” Then, he says, he “realized if I’m struggling, these guys are going to have the same problems if someone doesn’t teach them a different way.”

The Building Men Program arose out of an intramural basketball program and, under Horan’s guidance, morphed into a leadership and character-building program. In 2017, Horan was asked to focus on Building Men full-time and the district wrote the program into an MBK grant. They have kept the Building Men name because it is recognized and has a solid history within the district.

Horan says he is “part of a village. Part of teachers and staff and coaches that pour into these young men’s lives.” He adds that they are all “doing the best we can to support our young men in middle and high school.” Next year, they hope to add fourth and fifth grades to the program.

The Building Men / MBK program in the Syracuse City School District is focused on making a difference in the lives of the young men who participate. Horan says they work on character, positive relationships, and living in integrity.

Their activities have included community service projects, character talks, STEM activities, summer programs, athletics camps, and reading and discussing novels. One of the more important service projects was chosen by their MBK Fellows, a men’s mental health project for their community. Horan says they are “teaching people about resources around mental health.”

He adds that the topic can be a “stigma for young men” and is particularly important now, “coming out of COVID.”

As part of their mental health service project, they are hosting speakers from the community, talking openly about the stigma and about mental health itself, giving out pertinent information along with a hotline number, and sharing resources that are available to everyone. Horan says they are really promoting “that it’s okay to have help. We all need help and here’s where you can get some.”

Speakers from the community are also a big part of the Building Men / MBK program in the Syracuse City School District. The mayor, police chief, probation officers, and business owners have all spoken with the young men, sharing their experiences growing up and providing encouragement for the possibilities for the students’ futures.

The program has produced a long list of success stories over the years. Many of the graduates have returned to work in the Building Men Program in some capacity. Others are “playing professional ball, running a software company, and running a film studio,” Horan says. When asked about the influence of the Building Men / MBK program on the opportunities these young men are enjoying, Horan says humbly, “I know we play a part.”

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN PATHWAY

The Syracuse City School District program is aligned with the goals of the New York State My Brother’s Keeper initiative, which seeks to “change the narrative” of boys and young men of color. They are focused on closing the opportunity gaps, or eliminating them altogether, and working with the young men to help them reach their full potential.

These goals are also instilled in the My Brother’s Keeper program in the Brentwood Union Free School District, run by Dr. Chief Taylor. A retired U.S. Air Force command chief, Taylor transitioned to the education



field by way of his leadership in the Junior ROTC program. He completed his doctoral work in education at Wilmington University in Delaware and was “blessed to be promoted to assistant principal.” He is now in his eighteenth year in the district and is currently the assistant principal at the Ross Center.

Taylor says the MBK program is “all about getting students to set their own goals.” One of the major aspects of the program is for young men to learn time management, which helps them tremendously in their efforts “to take responsibility for their own pathway.” As Taylor explains their approach, it is “much more effective if we get buy-in from the student.”

Dropout and graduation rates are among the biggest concerns in the district. Taylor says they saw the MBK program “as a program to enhance our efforts.” He adds that they “work with students for the students to come up with a plan to improve their grades.” It’s important to have “them get involved in the process.”

The time management piece becomes very important in that process. Students learn how to set up dedicated study time at home, free from distractions. They also learn “to not be ashamed of going to a teacher and saying, ‘I need extra help.’” Taylor says they “talk a lot about networking with other students, to come up with a study group.” He adds that students are encouraged to not underestimate the value of working with their peers.

Brentwood’s MBK program currently has 130 students participating, including those from the middle school, high school, and the freshman center. Taylor was assistant principal

at the freshman center when he and assistant superintendent Monique Darrisa-Akil put in the application for the MBK program. Now in its fifth year, it was the first MBK program on Long Island. They started with 30 students, and it expands every year.

TEAM BUILDING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community involvement is important to the MBK program, on a number of levels. In Syracuse, Joe Horan says the goals for his young men are “to be husbands, fathers, and community members that are there to help the community.” He emphasizes that they are not expected to be superstars, but rather someone with significance who will “trust his true north” to live his life and “help people around him.” The community service they choose each year, such as this year’s mental health project, is “a service project that surrounds the pillars.”

In Brentwood, Taylor has added family community engagement to their MBK program. He says they have recruited “parent connectors.” These parents are involved in workshops on accessing the student portal, graduation requirements, and the college application process. They have parent representation on building and district meetings involving student academic planning. Parents act as “advocates to forward parent concerns and requests for information or services to improve academic outcomes.”

Taylor and his MBK team plan “a ton of special events during the year.” They have included a college tour trip to Albany as well as community service projects that benefit the local food bank, Pronto, and a local elementary school. Team-building activities have included a trip to Adventure Park for ziplining.

The Brentwood MBK team will do home visits, targeting “students who have issues with attendance or are failing two or more classes.” They set up teams, coordinate

with the parents, and speak to the young men using their upperclassmen as mentors. The message is a “pep speech” letting the students know that “whatever stations they’re at, there are opportunities to get help.” The seniors at Brentwood also host a podcast called Brentwood Teens, discussing a range of topics as they reach out to the teens in their community.

Regular meetings are an important piece of the MBK program for the young men in each school district. Taylor says that young men at the freshman center meet once a week and participate, in partnership with youth enrichment services, in workshops on college and career readiness, setting goals, effective communications, resume writing, and job interview techniques. The high school group also meets once a week.

Once a month, they hold a joint meeting between the freshman center and high school students that is typically centered on a team-building activity. Guest speakers are brought in from various career fields, to talk about “how they got from being in high school to being successful in their chosen field.”

Taylor adds that they “incorporate a lot of social emotional learning (SEL) instruction and activities.” He explains that this “was a huge piece during COVID lockdowns when schools were closed and on remote.”

Being able to conduct their team meetings during that time was critical for continuing to engage their students.

ALIGNED WITH NY STATE GOALS

Taylor says proudly, “This has been one of the better years for our current students.” The Brentwood program was contacted recently by Dr. Anael Alston, assistant commissioner, Office of Access, Equity, and Community Engagement Services, who wanted two students to serve on the New York State Board of Regents Graduation Measures

Initiative Student Forum. One of their students was selected by the Islip Town Environmental Council to sit on that board. They also have student members from their MBK program who are sitting on the newly established Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee on the state level, which “involves community stakeholders and district administrators.”

Brentwood, Syracuse, and other districts in the state have among their students MBK Fellows, who are inducted each year as part of their program. The purpose of the New York MBK Fellows program is “to provide rising 12th grade high school students, with an emphasis on boys and young men of color, with opportunities to gain authentic leadership experience(s) and develop service projects beneficial to the schools they attend and the communities they live in.” The newest Fellows were introduced at the annual New York State MBK Symposium, which was held in April.

Taylor says the incoming fellows for Brentwood were particularly excited to be inducted as part of the summit. He adds that the MBK program has “interacted with Dr. Alston all year on a regular basis. He exposes our students to seeing the world in different colored lenses with his Mastermind book series virtual book club.”

During the summit, Dr. Alston, Chancellor Lester W. Young, Jr., and a host of other leaders “told our young men that the struggle continues to obtain equity and equality across the board in education but emphasized the value of education to prepare and position our young men to carry the torch as a new generation of change agents.”

The four specific areas of focus for the MBK program in the state of New York are “cradle-to-career strategies and programs; recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers who reflect New York’s diversity; strengthening family involvement in schools and communities; and the creation and expansion of school models that improve outcomes for boys and young men of color.” The New York State Education Department has further expanded the



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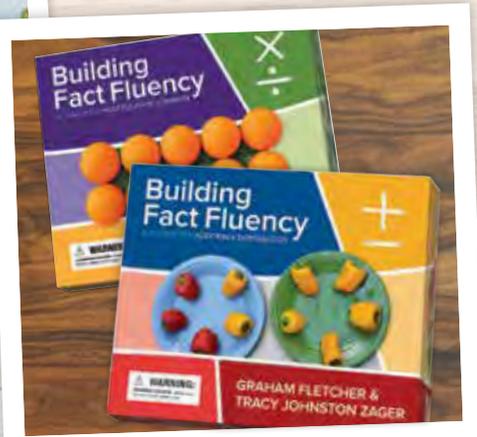


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MBK program to “provide authentic leadership experiences and trainings and incentivizing school districts to meet the needs of Native American students.”

THE CHALLENGE AND THE CHANGE

The original vision of the MBK program, as promoted by President Obama, laid out the vision, mission, need, and challenge for boys and young men of color. Obama said, “I have always believed that the single most important task we have as a nation is to make sure our young people can go as far as their dreams and hard work will take them.”

The mission of the MBK Alliance is to lead “a cross-sector national call to action focused on building safe and supportive communities for boys and young men of color where they feel valued and have clear pathways to opportunity.”

The challenge is that many young men of color live in poverty. The MBK Alliance states that “Black, American

Indian, and Hispanic children are between six and nine times more likely than white children to live in areas of concentrated poverty.” In addition, “High school graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students are 16 and 12 percentage points lower than white students, respectively. Many districts see 50 percent graduation rates or worse for boys of color.”

Under the leadership and guidance of individuals such as Joe Horan and Dr. Chief Taylor, who are focused on closing the gap and changing the narrative for these young men, MBK participants have the opportunity to visualize and dream of a future in ways they might not otherwise have done before – in the end, stretching their potential, improving their outcomes, and creating brighter tomorrows full of possibilities.

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

BRENTWOOD

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

Brentwood MBK participants created the following creed four years ago. They recite it at the beginning of every meeting at every building, to get them focused on their purpose.

I am self-motivated.
 I am intelligent, hard-working and ambitious.
 I am a team player, but most importantly,
 I am part of a brotherhood.
 I am driven and focused.
 I believe greatness should never be achieved easily.
 My goals can be accomplished by working hard, staying focused and having determination.
 I will work hard and become a beacon for the next generation.
 I am who I was made to be – an **ACHIEVER. I AM MBK!**

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