

Guiding Girls from Dreams to Success

WHILE GROWING UP, YOUNG CHILDREN ARE OFTEN TOLD TO DREAM BIG AND THAT THEY CAN DO ANYTHING THEY SET THEIR MINDS ON. ALTHOUGH THESE MOTIVATIONAL SAYINGS MAY NOT BE ENTIRELY INCORRECT, THEY NEGLECT TO MENTION THE ADVERSITY THAT MANY MAY FACE WHILE STRIVING TOWARD THEIR GOALS. THE RHODE ISLAND CITY OF CENTRAL FALLS HAS IMPLEMENTED A PROGRAM THAT AIMS TO TEACH LOCAL YOUTH HOW TO AVOID OR NAVIGATE POTENTIAL PITFALLS AS THEY PURSUE THEIR DREAMS.

EMPOWER HER

Acknowledging that they live in one of Rhode Island's most socioeconomically challenged communities, Police Chief Anthony Roberson and Mayor Maria Rivera wanted to work together to find a pathway to empower Central Falls students. A specific focus was placed on finding unique and innovative ways to provide young girls with access to learning, leadership, and growth opportunities that would inspire their future aspirations.

The Leading Ladies Initiative was conceptualized to remedy the lack of female mentors in several professional

industries. "This initiative effectively creates a vehicle that increases the opportunity for teenage girls to have meaningful access to professional adult women who act as mentors," said Chief Roberson. These mentors come from various fields, such as education, politics, commerce, and medicine.

Police officers not only join this group of volunteers every year, but they also are essential to the program's preparation, implementation, and continuation. Once the Central Falls Police Department confirms the volunteer mentors, they begin their search for mentees. The agency works with the local school district to select

15 female students who may benefit from having a mentor. Each teen's mentor is selected based on their knowledge in the area that the mentee wishes to develop. One factor that the selection committee takes into consideration during the partnership process is the circumstances in which the mentor and mentee were raised. Commonality is thought to foster a deeper connection, as the mentor may have faced similar challenges as the mentee and be able to offer advice on how to overcome them.

Once each student is paired with a mentor, they start building a relationship during a shopping spree. They visit partnering clothing stores to find appropriate clothing for the workplace. While shopping, the mentor provides information about their respective fields and guidance on how to achieve set goals. It is hoped that having these conversations in a culturally sensitive, low-stress way will foster genuine connections between the pair.

As the program progresses, the conversations continue. Along with providing education about their prospective field, the mentors support and encourage the mentees to manage their own learning to maximize their potential. The young



girls are given advice on how to prepare for higher education and professional interviews. It is important that mentors are intentional about helping their mentees build leadership and critical thinking skills, as well as personal accountability and decision-making. "As most of us are aware, one's career trajectory is rarely a straight path," Chief Roberson said. Therefore, mentors must also have a willingness to share mistakes and failures along with successes because both types of experiences provide valuable opportunities for learning.

The students also receive scholarships, professional headshots, and résumé and tutoring services during the program. The funding for these services is raised via philanthropic investments.

CONCLUSION

Having female mentors to ward off potential obstacles, while uplifting any successes, could be the key to increasing women's representation in the

workforce—especially in stereotypically male-dominant fields.

"The Leading Ladies Initiative promotes and reinforces the fact that all teenage girls have the potential to become leaders who can drive the change that our communities, country, and world so desperately need," said Chief Roberson. Over the years that the initiative has been in place, the Central

Hills Police Department has garnered national and international accolades for the citywide effort to support young girls. ♡



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Central Falls Police Department provides the following advice in starting a similar youth program focused on empowering women through mentoring:

- When confirming mentors, it is important to develop a qualifications list (desire to see others succeed, patience, etc.).
- It is strongly suggested that the volunteer mentors are trained in how to engage with youth. This is to ensure mentors have the basic knowledge, attitude, and skills needed to build and support an effective relationship.

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