EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY

Organization 'connects' youth, mentors for brighter future

by L. Pat Williams

contributing writer

Daniel F. Basell, founder and CEO of Cabrini Connections, is galvanizing the business community to support the lives of young people who reside in Chicago's underserved and impoverished communities.

By investing time and dollars into the high-risk communities, Basell says business leaders can more directly and effectively assure that at-risk youth will have equal opportunities in the corporate sector.

"It takes individuals in the business community to get involved with the community as a whole," he says. "Business leaders are the people who can open the doors for young people to gain access to future careers."

Basell, a mentor himself, knows the powerful affect mentoring can have on youth.

A former advertising copywriter at Montgomery Ward, Basell structured the business model of his non-profit organization tantamount to that of a corporation. He says this structure is necessary for non-profits to succeed on a social level as well as a financial level.

"Think about corporations. You have an advertising department, a marketing department, a human resource department—all of these departments are pivotal for that company to function. But most importantly, this type of structure is necessary in reaching customers and building clientele. This is where most non-profits miss the mark," he says. "You have to have an understanding on how to generate funding and reach the community." 

Cabrini Connections was birthed out of Basell's personal connection to a young man who lived in the Cabrini-Green housing projects in the 1970's. While mentoring the young man, Basell and community residents were further inspired to develop a mentoring program. He admits, however, that the inception of his organization developed by happenstance rather than by design.

"There was a group of parents and residents who decided that they wanted me to head up the group and at the time, I didn't know what I was doing. But I began to look at how at (Montgomery Ward) every week we were developing campaigns and strategies to reach our customers. And so, I just began to adapt and incorporate those same strategies into the structure of the organization.

Cabrini Connections, 800 W. Huron, formally came into existence in October, 1992 and was incorporated in February, 1993. At its early stage, primarily we invited leaders of mentor and tutor programs from the Cabrini-Green area to network at lunch and learn meetings. The meetings became so popular that eventually Basell and his team network of organizations began to construct a joint-development of volunteer training sessions that has allowed many organizations to keep aloft in the non-profit sector.

"Right now we are building our database of tutors and mentors and we have 400 locations citywide—we reach about 14,000 people a month from our printed material and about 4,800 through our Web sites," Basell says.

"So many parents would contact us concerning mentors or tutors for their children and when we would look up their addresses to see if there were any programs in those areas, we would find more times than not that there were no mentoring or tutoring programs available," he continues. "So now, I actively evangelize if you will, getting the word out to those in the business community to take part in mentoring programs."

Although Cabrini Connections primarily concentrates on placing youth that reside within the Cabrini-Green area with mentors from the business community, Basell and his network of mentors and tutors have developed Tutor/Mentor Exchange and Tutor/Mentor Connection—to provide youth who reside in other communities and neighborhoods with mentors.

These areas includes the city's South, West and North Sides. Participating and affiliate organizations include Youth Outreach Services, Youth Guidance, Jane Addams Hull House Association, Boys & Girls Club of Chicago, La Rabida Children's Hospital, The Youth Program, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Metro Chicago, Chicago Youth Centers, All People's Day, Children's Bureau of Chicago, Black United Fund of Illinois, Inc., and The Chicago Bar Association/Foundation Lead A Hand Program.

Basell says: "Our organization operates on a two-tiered level: providing training services and resources for mentor and tutor programs and teaming up youth and business professionals via mentor and tutor programs." 

He says his organization is designed to help organizations that are geared toward reaching youth reach them more effectively and helping youth realize their career goals by pairing them up with individuals who have achieved those goals.

Furthermore, Basell believes that this structure also helps to curb the racial and gender disparity in the corporate sector. "It is a fact that women and minorities are not equally represented in many career fields like technology or law. These industries come out with studies and say that they want more women and minorities to participate in these fields, so what better way of doing that than by having individuals from these industries mentor a youth and be that open door to someone who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity."

For more information on Cabrini Connections, call 312-492-9614.