Aquarium hosts Tutor/Mentor Leadership Conference

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Visit any Chicago neighborhood and you'll find kids who could use a hand, a role model, an adult to help them through the trials of growing up. Living in those same neighborhoods are adults who want to help, to make a personal contribution to their community. The 160 or so Chicago tutor and mentor organizations, mostly small, volunteer-run and rich in enthusiasm, connect the two.

At the Tutor/Mentor Leadership Conference, held at Shedd Aquarium Nov. 11 and 12, 200 representatives from these organizations, as well as members of support groups from museums and universities, met to showcase some of their best work, share skills and ideas, and offer training to staff and volunteers. The conference was organized by Calbright Connections, which offers one-to-one mentoring in the Calbright-Green area, and trains volunteers and organizes support for tutor and mentor organizations throughout Chicago.

Dan Basill, president and CEO of Calbright Connections, started the case for tutor/mentor programs: "Each day 20 million adolescents decide how they will spend at least five of their waking hours when they are not in school... For too many, the street is an attractive alternative... These programs focus on the positive — the talents, knowledge and dreams of young people."

Mayor Daley proclaimed Nov. 6-12 as Tutor/Mentor Week in Chicago. Dr. Leonard Dominquez, deputy mayor for education, presented the conference's keynote address, sharing stories of his youth and the adults who made a difference in his life. The program leaders took workshops in strategic planning, fund-raising, and recruiting and retaining volunteers. The second day was for the volunteers themselves, with hands-on activities in reading, science and math.

In hosting the conference, the Aquarium provided a large, comfortable exhibit and workshop space in stimulating surroundings (where else can speakers have sharks and barnacles on the walls looking down at their flip charts?) and found an opportunity to introduce the institution as a valuable resource for the one-on-one learning these programs promote. The Aquarium's table of materials, outlining our internship program and providing information on services to groups such as these, was well received. The conference also allowed us to organize a planning team for a tutor/mentor training program here.

An even larger conference is scheduled for May 19 and 20, in collaboration with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Uptown. It will repeat the basics of how to build a successful tutor/mentor program and highlight summer opportunities. Aquarium representatives will be there, publicizing our new community programs and seeking additional collaborations.

Dr. Leonard Dominquez, Chicago's deputy mayor for education, addresses the Tutor/Mentor Leadership Conference held at Shedd Aquarium.