

Shaping the future Stamford nonprofit helps teens create long-term plans

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STAMFORD -- An unusual quiet overtook the conference table in the nonprofit FUTURE 5's office Wednesday afternoon. For the past three weeks at this time, half a dozen young men discussed their hopes and the challenges that might trip them up. But today, each penciled out a self-assessment, the start of a game plan to guide them to their goals. These were the steps, in the language of FUTURE 5, that would get the teens from "here" to "there."

Paul Yumbla, a rising senior at Westhill High School, volunteered to share his with the group.

Yumbla, one of the more quiet teens, had spoken previously of his interest in becoming an English teacher. But poor grades his freshman year and struggles with math left him concerned about his college prospects. This summer, he is preparing to take the SAT, a college admissions test.

"Hopefully, my all-right (grade point average) will be balanced out by my good SAT score," he said.

Yumbla said he faced "a lot of negativity" in his apartment complex. The neighbors downstairs, with whom he had once been close, had become involved in drugs.

"Where do you study?" asked Grant MacDonald, one of FUTURE 5's two founding partners.

"At home, mostly."

"Maybe a new environment for some of the stuff you do," MacDonald said.

Bite-sized solutions such as this one will fill the game plan the young men have begun developing with help from MacDonald, Clif McFeely and Aiesha McLean, an intern from the University of Connecticut. Coaches -- not mentors -- also make the program unique. The nonprofit plans to connect each of its participants with five coaches who can offer guidance in about 15 minutes per week.

Yumbla, for example, could benefit from being connected with an English teacher.

When Yumbla suggested finding a friend to help him in math, MacDonald turned this into a suggestion that Yumbla volunteer as an English tutor, an idea Yumbla welcomed.

"I never really thought about it," he said after the meeting.

FUTURE 5 opened its doors in March, the month after MacDonald and McFeely shutdown their marketing and advertising company, North Castle Communications. In this former life, they operated the Teen Panel, which sought insight from teenagers drawn from area high schools. That work and a personal interest led to documentary work exploring the achievement gap for the GE Foundation in Stamford and Louisville, Ky. In the 20-minute pieces, students talked about where they are and they would like to be. The 25 hours of interviews they recorded dug into the mindset of hopeful kids faced with bad neighborhoods, absent or unsupportive parents, and other "traps" that make success -- or "there" -- so far away, and the realization they won't make it without help.

"We really saw a need to address the isolation, alienation and mistrust," MacDonald said.

FUTURE 5's approach is intended to be a solution.

These eight young men are FUTURE 5's second group. A dozen young women have finished with sessions at the conference table and recently received their game plans.

Michelle Aristizabal, another rising Westhill senior, said the desire for more guidance in her college search motivated her to join FUTURE 5. Her long-term goals include a four-year college -- she would be the first in her family to attend university -- good grades and a stable job in a field she has yet to select.

She said she expects one of the short-term steps, centering around a chat with herself in the mirror each day, to be her most difficult.

"I think definitely it is going to be hard to not compare myself to other people because there will always be people who are better than you," she said.

True to their background, MacDonald and McFeely speak of FUTURE 5 as a brand, which they hope will go viral when teenagers spread the word among their friends.

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To become involved, as a teenager or as a coach, call (203) 358-8787, ext. 2104, e-mail coach@futurefive.org or student@futurefive.org, or stop by 135 Atlantic St.

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