

## **Shining the Light on Our Young Men**

By Robert E. Smith

The statistics do not paint a pretty picture of the state of young black men in America. According to a National Urban League 2007 report entitled “The State of Black America: Portrait of the Black Male,” African American men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed and seven times more likely to be incarcerated than their white male counterparts. What’s more, young black males between the ages of 15 and 34 are nine times more likely to die of homicide and seven times as likely to suffer from AIDS as compared to white males.

Even if we have not read this report, we have heard many other similar figures but we know that the fate of young black men is much more than just statistics on a page. These figures represent our brothers, sons, and neighbors. In short, these figures represent our community.

Amid numerous negative reports on the crisis state of young black men in America, there is a light that is providing hope to at-risk youth in the Twin Cities. This past October, members of the Gamma Xi Lambda and Mu chapters of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. partnered with Q Health Connections (an affiliate of South Side Community Health Services) to host Project Alpha. With a focus on middle and high school young men ages 12 to 18, Project Alpha is a motivational and skill-building educational program that emphasizes graduating from high school, going to college, networking, understanding finances, taking responsibility, forming healthy relationships, and preventing teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Fraternity members Sean Burns and Gene Ward Jr. who are both teachers in the Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts designed the curriculum and helped run the weekly Saturday morning sessions at Sabathani Community Center. By incorporating interactive learning and inviting dynamic, motivational speakers, the powerful messages of Project Alpha were able to sink-in to reinforce messages of personal and community uplift that are taught at home and in our neighborhood churches.

After only one 8-week period beginning last October, the impact of Project Alpha is already beginning to be felt. Reactions from the young men themselves ranged from feeling more comfortable speaking in front of people to considering going to college for the first time. Ward said, “Many students like being able to be surrounded by positive men--the vibe in the room was always good.”

The local Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. chapters are looking forward to continuing and growing this successful program and have already met with Q Health Connections coordinator, Camille Thomas and director, Clarence Jones to finalize dates for the next Project Alpha sessions in 2008. We are excited to announce we have the support of the McKnight Foundation as we move forward and expand the programming.

For those who did not participate in Project Alpha this past October, the new sessions will begin next October at Sabathani Community Center. Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., chapter President, Reuben Thompson-Amarteifio said, “This is just a small part of what we could be doing in the community, but our continued efforts will go a long way. I am very excited for the future of Project Alpha in Minnesota.”

One of the goals of Project Alpha is to get our young men through the especially difficult teenage years where the temptation to get involved in gangs, drugs, or other risky behaviors is especially strong. By showing them better alternatives and exposing them to the benefits of getting an education, we aim to get them focused on a brighter future than the one the dismal reports have painted for them.

For more information about getting involved with Project Alpha, you may contact Camille Thomas at [camille.thomas@qhealthservices.org](mailto:camille.thomas@qhealthservices.org).