

Scholars program helps black students in Alameda County

'A movement' to college

By Katy Murphy
Oakland Tribune

OAKLAND

Cedric Brown stood onstage Monday night, next to a large cutout of President Barack Obama, and made a confession: He had a selfish reason for organizing the celebration of young black men on the path to college.

"I wanted a room full of college-bound young brothers," Brown, director of The Black Boys College Bound Initiative, began. "Here you are, and you're not alone."

While the audience's warmth and enthusiasm filled the auditorium of the Oakland Museum of California, there were plenty of empty seats. The relatively small number of graduates honored that evening illustrated the challenge facing the year-old, Bay Area initiative: to increase the ranks of young black men who graduate high school prepared for college.

In 2004, 1,806 African-American boys started high school in Alameda County, according to data from the state Department of Education. Four years later, just 200 graduated with the courses and grades required to attend a state university — about 11 percent of the number of black males enrolled in the ninth grade, years earlier.

In Oakland's public schools, that percentage is about 9 percent.

The \$1 million Black Boys College Bound Initiative, funded by the Mitchell Kapor Foundation, supports about 11 new and long-standing programs that work with about 400 students from San Francisco and a number of East Bay cities, including Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond, Hayward and San Leandro.

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Though each of the programs has a slightly different approach, they address a range of skills, from social etiquette and work ethic to math, literacy and college counseling.

This year, 49 of the 56 graduating seniors in the program plan to attend a two-year or a four-year college.

Brandon Briggs is one of them. At Monday's celebration, Briggs, who graduated from Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland and plans to attend Texas Southern University in the fall, gave a passionate speech as other young men from his East Bay program — What if the Prince Dared to Be King — stood beside him.

"This is not a project, but a movement," Briggs said, before launching into a rousing call-and-response with the question: "Where are the black men?"

During his speech, Briggs said the program's mentors helped the young men learn "how to tie a tie, how to stay focused, how to treat women with dignity, and the definition of real men."

Tarrell Gamble, who runs the 100 Black Men mentoring program at Richmond High School, said many boys need a reality check — and exposure to a wider array of careers.

"Kids in high school, they're terribly naive," he said. "They all want to play in the NBA, play in the NFL, or become a media mogul."

Gamble said he took one aspiring basketball player from Richmond High, Aaron Sio, to practice with the UC Berkeley team; Sio quickly learned the level of skill required to play at the college level.

"For him, it actually worked," Gamble said, adding that Sio will attend Holy Names University in the fall.

Other students, such as 13-year-old Derek Spears, from King Middle School in Berkeley, were encouraged to separate themselves from friends who might lead them off track.

Derek said he always earned good grades, but had been coasting through middle school before he joined a group with the M3 Foundation. Now, he said, he gives his all to his academics and his athletic pursuits, he has distanced himself from potentially negative influences, and he has earned a perfect grade-point average.

"I'm going to have to get to college, some way, some how," Derek said. "If I'm going to sacrifice some things, it's going to help me in the long run."