

Mentor groups focus on teen-on-teen intervention

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Natasha Johnson met Ron King when she was in middle school and put off his invitation to join a support club for a while. She's glad he kept asking.

"One day I finally went," Natasha says. "There was something about the club that kept me going. There was a lot going on at home.

"I struggled with a lot of anger with my mother and sisters and brothers. Financially, we struggled at home. At school, it was tough for me, too."

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Now, at age 19, she's a leader in the program, a graduate of Clay High School and a freshman in the nursing program at Indiana University South Bend. She won a Do the Right Thing award from the Police Department for overcoming obstacles.

Natasha credits King's Ark Angels and Young Life that work together -- Ark Angels providing



Tribune Photo/GENE KAISER
Montrice White and Natasha Johnson are part of the Ark Angels program.

More Information

How to help

Natasha wants a PSP and a digital camera for Christmas. Montrice wants a laptop. To help the group, call Ron King at (574) 904-1707 or e-mail kingronnie@sbcglobal.net. For more information about Ark Angels, visit www.strivingforexcellence.org.

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resources for Young Life programs.

"The change came when I got into high school and I got into Young Life," she says. "I started going to the camp in the summer. They're camps that talk to you about God. I officially got saved when I went to my first Young Life camp.

"I started feeling (conflicted) about a lot of stuff I was doing in my life. From there, my attitude started to change. I just got more and more mature as time went by. I was still holding on to God."

Montrice White, 17, Washington High School senior and cheerleader who met King when she was a freshman, says the programs also have changed her life. She plans to study forensic science at IU Bloomington.

"I've matured," Montrice says. "I've learned how to keep good conversation, good communication skills. I've become more active with kids. I'm also a mentor at my school."

Ark Angels, which King founded seven years ago, focuses its activities at the Martin Luther King Center. The agency works with separate groups for middle and high school students and one-on-one relationships.

"We call them clubs," King says. "They're peer-on-peer positive building groups. Mostly what we do is direct intervention. Our primary emphasis is teen intervention and leadership development.

"The bulk of our kids are regular kids that are looking for somewhere to belong. The more positive you become, you eventually find faith and you find God."

Montrice and Natasha, who have both found redemption after extremely difficult circumstances, demonstrate the possibilities in the programs.

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"They offer inspiration for other kids," King says. "I've learned from them and they've learned from me. Both of them came out of situations where even though there was a support system, there were also obstacles."

Ark Angels raises money to send people to Young Life camp north of Grand Rapids -- \$600 a child. The agency needs adult and college-age volunteers. The teenagers need clothes, games and school supplies. They also gather clothes, food and other supplies for needy people helped by other churches and organizations to which they belong.

"We're always looking for incentives like gift cards to give to kids to motivate them into leadership," King says, adding that youths compete in clubs to win hats and shirts and he buys dozens of \$5 McDonald's Arch Cards. "We like to reward accomplishment."

"You think \$5 is nothing, but it's a lot of money for some who doesn't have anything," Natasha says.

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