

## Youth Guidance (B.A.M.)

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### BECOMING A MAN

Marlin Connors was a young man who did everything very much alone. Home-schooled, the 18-year-old had few friends, those relationships were superficial, and he never asked for help from anyone. Now, because of a unique program in Chicago schools and community centers, all that has changed and he will never feel alone again.

Becoming A Man (B.A.M.), a dropout and violence prevention program for approximately 1,800 at-risk males, is turning boys into men in close to 40 schools and community centers around the Chicago area. By developing social-cognitive skills through storytelling, role-playing and group exercises, the program imparts tools for impulse control and personal responsibility, and raises aspirations for the future. Perhaps most importantly, it gives young men the opportunity to form a network of other men they can trust.

“I wasn’t the type to ask for help before,” Marlin, now 19, says. “Having the B.A.M. community means there’s always someone who can show me where I lost my way. They can check me in place by flat telling me when I’m not acting with integrity or accountability. I’m a lot more connected now, less on my own.”

### The importance of taking responsibility

B.A.M. was developed as part of Youth Guidance, an organization that has been serving Chicago young people since 1924, when it was originally founded as The Church Mission of Help. The program’s principles come largely from the Mankind Project International, founded in 1985 to support the building of emotionally mature, accountable and compassionate male role models.

“The young men in the B.A.M. program are taught to take responsibility for their own actions,” says Christopher Jaffe, Strategic Development Manager at Youth Guidance. “Even when there are factors working against them ... they have to realize that ‘ultimately I’m responsible for me.’”

“That’s how B.A.M. breaks the cycle of poverty,” Jaffe continues. “We get these young men off the streets by making them realize that they can choose to be who they want to be. That they can choose not to respond to certain outside pressures, that ‘I’m responsible for turning my work in on time, that I’m responsible for showing up at school so I can graduate and get a job. That I can create my own future and choose a life that is not destructive.’”

A two-year study by the University of Chicago Crime Lab found the program reduced violent crime arrests by 44 percent, and weapons crime and vandalism by 36 percent. It also showed that B.A.M. increases future high school graduation rates by as much as 23 percent. These impressive numbers — and the fact that B.A.M. participants miss only one hour per week of classroom time — are winning strong endorsement from school administrators and teachers alike.

**A TWO-YEAR STUDY BY THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO CRIME LAB FOUND THE PROGRAM REDUCED VIOLENT CRIME ARRESTS BY 44 PERCENT, AND WEAPONS CRIME AND VANDALISM BY 36 PERCENT. IT ALSO SHOWED THAT B.A.M. INCREASES FUTURE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES BY AS MUCH AS 23 PERCENT.**

### **At the core: Fathers and sons**

A major focus of B.A.M. is on improving the relationships young men have with their fathers and/or other male figures in their lives. “B.A.M. gives us traits that our father figures may not have taught us,” Marlin says. “Prior, I didn’t know my father very well. He was more of an enigma. He was in the household, but a lot of the time he traveled. When he tried to get closer to me, I didn’t feel comfortable doing that.”

Often Marlin would escape by traveling to the homes of other relatives, feeling, as he puts it, “maybe a change of pace would be more comfortable.” This only compounded the problem, though, because he had even less contact with his father.

When he met B.A.M. instructor Jasper Strong, things began to change. “He’s a father-figure type,” Marlin says. “He speaks clearly and cleanly, unlike a lot of people in my life. He has a strong presence — he reprimands, but in a fatherly way.”

The relationship with Strong motivated Marlin to realize that “I already had a father, and I wanted to get to know him. I’ve been asking to spend time with him and we seem to enjoy each other’s company. Even if it’s just a car ride to the gas station, we get to talk about careers, about hobbies. Now I can call him ‘Dad.’”

### **What does it take to be a man?**

B.A.M. classes are held once a week over a 30-week period. They focus on six core values: integrity, accountability, self-determination, positive anger expression, visionary goal setting, and respect for women.

“With integrity, we have a discussion about money,” explains Cameron Frazier, Marlin’s B.A.M. counselor, “borrowing money and what happens when the person doesn’t give it back. Marlin made the point that you can be out of integrity because of circumstances that aren’t your fault. So if someone owes you money and he’s pulled over while he’s bringing you the money and goes to jail, it’s out of his control. So he’s *in* integrity while *out* of integrity.”

By contrast, the other men in the group were less nuanced in their thinking, Frazier said. “So I owe you money, so what are you going to do, shoot me? That was their attitude. They don’t think about the in between, there’s no intellectual solution. When Marlin brought up his point, it turned into a debate that lasted for 45 minutes.”

**“MARLIN HELPS PUT THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE FOR THE OTHER PARTICIPANTS. HE KNOWS THE STREET – HE KNOWS HOW TO NAVIGATE THE STREETS WITHOUT GETTING HURT – BUT HE DOESN’T WANT TO BE THERE.”**

Marlin also viewed women differently. “He pointed out that if you call girls ‘whores,’ that’s how you’re going to treat them,” says Frazier. “The other guys didn’t want to look at what it would be like if their mother was called a whore. Marlin’s point was that every woman is somebody’s daughter. He made the other guys realize that if you don’t respect the woman, there’s no respect for yourself.”

“Some of the guys were disrespectful of women,” Marlin adds, explaining that he learned respect from his sisters. “The guys were treating women as a conquest or object or just fun, instead of an individual with thoughts, feelings, plans.” As a result of these conversations, “they are owning up to more than they may have otherwise.”

“What Marlin says helps put things in perspective for the other participants,” Frazier says. “He’s intriguing to them and he gives them clarity. He articulates the issues in a way that makes the others want to aspire to articulate them the way he does. He knows the street — he knows how to navigate the streets without getting hurt — but he doesn’t want to be there.”

Marlin takes some credit for influencing the other young men in his group. “Some of the guys have become clearer on what they want to do,” he says. “One of the guys I know from B.A.M. used to be vague about his plans and now he’s interested in pursuing a boxing career. Another guy is now planning on college.”

Marlin has definitely become more serious about his own future. “He’s taken advantage of every opportunity he can,” says Frazier, noting that the young man has done very well in the job skills training classes he has taken while participating in B.A.M.

“At the end of it, the participants go through a mock interview,” Frazier continues. “Marlin has braids — he has twists in his hair. But when he went in for the job interview, his hair was in a ponytail and he was dressed in a suit, a scarf and a trench coat. He was as clean as a whistle.”

Marlin is planning to enroll in the Art Institute of Chicago. But no matter what he chooses to do in the future, he will have the support system to help him along. “Having these men in my life has changed my life,” Marlin concludes. “These are men I totally respect, and who I can always trust without a shadow of a doubt.”

*The name of the young man profiled in this story has been changed to protect his privacy.*