



Article published Mar 22, 2010

## Transforming the whole person Project Impact affects relationships as well as professional development

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The Rev. Hardie Blake Jr., left, and James Summers stand outside the offices of Project Impact South Bend, Inc. The program touches minds and transforms relationships as it develops business skill sets. Tribune  
Photo/SANTIAGO FLORES

### By GENE STOWE

*Tribune Correspondent*

*When it comes to changing the lives of the unemployed, ex-offenders, youth and other disenfranchised people, Project Impact South Bend Inc. means business.*

*The community transformation initiative, successor to the Rev. Hardie Blake Jr.'s Men of Scars, includes a working firm — Bethel Business Machines — where learners can practice computer recycling, refurbishing, repair and resale, as well as marketing and customer support.*

*But Project Impact touches hearts and minds as well as hands, attending to personal and relationship issues as well as professional development.*

*After the first training last year, where 82 participants decided after a weeklong boot camp to share the stipend money meant for 25 so they could all complete the 10 weeks, they told executive director Blake and vice president James Summers that learning about life mattered most.*

*"I was expecting people to say 'I learned how to do a great résumé' or 'I learned to interview more effectively,'æ" says Summers, who has a corporate background and consulted with the Chicago Urban League before he joined Blake.*

*"Without exception, the first things that came out of their mouths was their relationship with their children, their spouses, their families — how that had improved. That goes to the systemic change. You've changed in a way that's systemic."*

*Fifty-year-old career criminals were mentoring 19-year-olds to help them avoid prison-bound life, and most kept working after the classes and the stipends ended last summer. Another session starts next month.*

*Ongoing relationships foster a lifestyle that keeps change happening, Blake explains.*

*"Programs and projects come and go," he says. "There's a process. It continues to be a work in process rather than a program or project that starts and ends.*



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*"The spiritual and economic transformation has to be not just in the physical or the infrastructure. It has to become an inter-structure, in people's minds and thinking. You want behavior to change. You want the individual actually to no longer have to have a teacher. They become the teacher."*

*Nationally, Project Impact focuses mostly on youth. Blake combined the approach with his Men of Scars initiative for adults. The agency, housed in Ardmore-LaSalle Church of Christ, has nine employees.*

*A partnership with WorkOne this year will provide training for people ages 17 to 21 who, as Blake says, have dropped out of school and fallen through other cracks in life. They'll learn life skills, prepare to earn a GED and work at internships.*

*"We're going to work with 60 youth that will go through this whole process," Blake says. "We want to see them build that same kind of bonding that they become a team. They can help the community grow, especially as they reach back into their own neighborhoods."*

*"This enables us to take a small business, help them build capacity, take a chance on people in the community, and prove they can be sustainable," Summers adds.*

*One goal is to shift participants' loyalties from gangs to the whole community. Another is to channel the considerable entrepreneurial skills exhibited on the street into legitimate businesses.*

*"It's the same skills, just applied differently," Summers says. "You've got all of this talent. You've got all these individuals who are using these skills — and they're entrepreneurial skills — but they're using them for the wrong purpose."*

*The same skills apply when the person is working for someone else.*

*"The entrepreneurial training itself makes for a better employee," Summers says. "If I understand what it takes to run a business and I get how my performance impacts the bottom line and that's why I can get a raise or that's why I still have a job, the connection becomes altogether different."*

*Project Impact is preparing workers for an economy in which employers will expect multitasking skills. In the computer recycling business, workers learn to operate a forklift, take apart computers and enter data into an electronic inventory.*

*"The purpose was for them to be able to do all those multiple tasks and do it on a continuous basis, so we could monitor it and make sure they could do it well," Summers says.*

*"You've got to be able to do a variety of different things these days if you're going to be valuable enough for an employer to bring you in."*

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